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To Captain Frank R. Carey, U.S.M.C., I.R., for providing all the right details. Thanks, Dad.

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Gregory . . . you did it again.

These are the kind of people I'm talking about when readers ask me how I manage to write scientific, military and philosophical passages with accuracy. They are the people I mean when I cagily answer, "Oh . . . I have my sources."

Life is an offensive, directed against the repetitious mechanism of the universe.

—Alfred North Whitehead

Chapter One

The *Sergei G. Gorshkov* moved through the water as though the sea had been made solely to carry such ships. As every sailor knew in his deepest soul, there had been no ocean before there were ships, and the ocean had only gotten so large because ships of such bulk came to chase its farthest shorelines, to push its hem forever back, to conquer its lengths and breadths with their intrepid spirit. The ships, ever bigger, ever more powerful, ever more majestic, were the badge of spirit for mankind.

At least . . . sailors think so.

For bakers, it's the bread that rises in their ovens that mankind should pay attention to.

Point of view.

Arkady Reykov unbuttoned the dark blue overcoat of the Soviet navy and shook the heavy outerwear from his shoulders. His petty officer was there to catch the coat and store it away. Reykov did not acknowledge the service, but simply strode onto the bridge, coatless, authority intact. Today the eyes of the Politburo were on him and this vessel.

His executive officer met him immediately, with a dogged reliability that Reykov found slightly annoying but somehow always welcome. The two men nodded at each other, then turned at the same moment and the same angle to look out over the stunning landing deck of the Soviet Union's second full-deck carrier. The shipbuilding facility at Nikolayev was far behind them. Before them lay the open expanse of the Black Sea. Around them in a several-mile radius, the carrier support group plunged through the sea, barely out of sight. There were four heavy cruisers and six destroyers in the carrier group. The tanker force would catch up tomorrow.

Reykov was a large man, straight-shouldered and inclined to staidness, the type of Soviet man that appears in comedy-dramas when

typecasting is necessary to the story, except that he didn't have the obligatory mustache. Executive Officer Timofei Vasska was thinner, fairer, and younger, but both were handsome men—which, truth be told, didn't come in very handy in their particular vocation. But at least it was easier to get up in the morning.

One wanted to look good when one piloted a ship like this, this nuclear mountain upon the sea. It had taken a long time to store up the expertise to build a carrier. No one could become a naval architect just like that, and even if he could, where would he get the economic structure to support his knowledge? It takes a vast technology, ideas, factories, machining, measuring, weighing, thinking, knowing, production, and counterproduction even to make a ballpoint pen. And a carrier is a little more expensive.

Reykov was proud of this Lenin-class *Gorshkov*. She was big, and the Soviets liked big. And she carried a weapon that was the first and only of its kind. Their pride and joy. Something even the Amerikanskis didn't have.

Reykov inflated his chest with a deep breath. His ship. Well, he could pretend it was his.

He felt the pulses of the five thousand men in his crew, throbbing with metronome steadiness beneath him as he stood on the bridge in the carrier's tower.

"Approaching maneuver area, Comrade Captain," Vasska said, his voice carrying more lilt than those words required.

Reykov acknowledged him with a quick look. "Signal the flight officer to begin launching the MiGs for tracking practice."

He felt a little shiver of thrill as he gave that order, for it was the first time the new MiGs would be launched from an aircraft carrier during an actual demonstration for dignitaries. Until now, only military eyes had seen this. The Soviet Union had finally learned how to work titanium instead of steel, and now there was a new class of MiGs light enough to be used on carriers. For years the motherland had sold its titanium to the U.S. while Soviet planes were still made of steel. Too heavy, too much fuel. It was with great pleasure that Arkady Reykov watched as the MiGs sheared off the end of the flight deck and took to the sky, one after another—seven of them.

"Have the fighters go out fifty miles and come in on various unannounced attack runs at the ship. Prepare for demonstration of

laser tracking and radar to show we could knock out each of the fighters as it appears. And advise the political commissar to get the dignitaries out of their beds. They'll want to be red instead of green today for a change."

Vasska put up a valiant fight as he dictated these orders to the appropriate stations, but despite himself his cheeks turned rosy and his shoulders shook. "They *have* been green, haven't they, Comrade Captain?" he muttered toward Reykov, keeping his voice low and his eye on the other bridge officers.

The captain smiled. "And tell them to be sure to get dressed before they come out on deck. Those American satellites can count your leg hairs."

"Haven't you heard the latest intelligence?" Vasska tossed back. "Bureaucrats have no leg hair."

Reykov leaned toward him in a manner so natural it had almost become unnoticeable after their years together. "They should put the bureaucrats in a gulag. Then things might get done."

Vasska smirked at him and gave him a delicate glance. "You used to be one of those."

"Yes," the captain said, "and they should've gagged me. Perhaps by now you'd be captain and I'd be on the Politburo."

"I don't want to be captain. When all the shooting starts, I like somebody to hide behind."

Reykov turned up one corner of his mouth. "That's all right. It's my secret desire never to sit on the Politburo. Are the drone targets operational for the tests? Have they been checked?"

"Several of them. We sent out two this morning, and one malfunctioned. Let's hope we have better odds for the demonstrations."

"In the old days," Reykov commented with his usual dryness, "there would've been self-destructs on the targets. Just in case we missed."

The two men shared a chuckle.

"The Teardrop missiles have been checked and rechecked. This batch is probably going to fire as it's supposed to, I hope. All this target

practice and nothing to shoot at," Vasska said as he watched the sea crash past *Gorshkov*'s vast prow.

"Mmmm," Reykov agreed, his lips pressed flat. "You know, Timofei, I've served almost thirty years and I've never been fired at even once."

Vasska straightened, his boyish face tight with a restrained grin. "Then how do you know you won't break under attack?"

"You've met my wife."

Vasska clasped his hands behind his back and lowered his voice again. "What's the situation with Borka?"

"I talked to him . . . I got him alone."

"Did you make progress?"

Reykov bobbed his brows and shrugged. "He can't be watched every minute. It's those times he's out of sight that make me worry."

"What have you tried?"

"Reasoning . . . threats . . . rewards . . . nothing works. I'm afraid the time is coming for severe action."

Vasska nodded sympathetically. "Be firm, Kady. I wish I could be there. This is what comes from too much permissiveness. Rebellion. Time will take care of it, though. Borka will eventually make his own decision, and then you can proudly say your grandson isn't wearing diapers anymore."

Even as he said it, Vasska fixed his eyes on his captain's thick dark hair with its tinge of silver just over his left brow, and had difficulty imagining Arkady Reykov as a grandfather. The captain's face was almost unlined, his eyes every bit as clear and vital as the day Vasska first saw him eight—or was it nine?—years ago, while Vasska was still a pilot and Reykov was flight officer on the small carrier *Moscow*. It hadn't been a bad eight years, at least not after the first two, when they finally believed they could speak candidly to each other. That is a day which in many relationships never comes at all.

"Be sure there are no other aircraft in the area, Comrade Vasska. Launch the target aircraft and let's proceed with this performance before we all get hungry and can't do our jobs."

“Shall we wait until the political commissar notifies us that the dignitaries are watching?”

A reed-thin smile stretched across Reykov’s face as he measured and tasted each alternative several times before finally narrowing his eyes on his privilege as captain. He leaned toward Vasska for another of those private exchanges. “Let’s *not*.”

Vasska’s cheeks tightened as he imagined the dignitaries hitting the ceilings of their staterooms when the gunnery practice began. He made his back straight and firmly announced to the duty officer, “Signal tracking maneuvers, Comrade Myakishev.”

The performance with live fighters went shiningly well, primarily because it was all “on paper.” There was no firing of weapons until the unmanned drones were launched to circle out wide across the expanse of the Black Sea and come back to harass the *Gorshkov* as had been carefully arranged and rearranged. The dummy missiles were bombarded with a hail of depleted-uranium slugs whose weight alone would be enough to press off an attacking missile if it hit at sufficient distance. There were dignitaries on board, and nothing was being left to chance. There were a few misfires, a few misses, and a few false starts, but while not a perfect performance, it was a performance that could be *interpreted* as perfect, if the right language were used. Reykov was certain the language would be selected as carefully as a mother clips her infant’s fingernails.

That immutable fact about Soviet coverage was little comfort, however, as Reykov turned to Timofei Vasska and quietly spoke words that chained them to their seats. “Prepare demonstration of the E.M.P.”

With the last hour’s weapons’ displays still booming in his ears, Vasska’s skin shrank from the order, though he let none of his apprehension show. Such a device. The first of its kind to be mounted on a moving unit. Even the stationary ones prior to this one had been nothing more than a few isolated test guns. This one was real, mounted permanently at the center of *Gorshkov*’s gunnery shroud. E.M.P. . . . controlled electromagnetic pulse.

“Signal the *Vladivostok* to begin firing dummy Teardrops. And Vasska,” Reykov added quickly, raising a finger, “be sure they only fire one at a time and give us forty seconds to reenergize the pulse.”

Vasska shook his head and said, “Won’t it be wonderful if our enemies are so cooperative as to never fire more than one missile at a time?”

Reykov shrugged his big shoulders and said, “We’re working on it. It’ll be good enough if we can scramble the guidance systems one by one. Let’s not ask for trouble. Just don’t make fools of the designers.”

Vasska nodded to Myakishev, who relayed the order out into the distance.

“Inbound,” came the dry announcement a few moments later. “One Teardrop missile, heading four-zero true.”

“Visual range?”

“In six seconds, sir.”

“When it becomes visible, we’ll fire the E.M.P. on my order.”

“Yes, Comrade Captain. Visibility in three . . . two . . . one . . . *mark*.”

They squinted into the crisp blue atmosphere and saw the incoming dummy missile. Hardly more than a silver glint against the sky, even the dud caused a hard ball in the pit of every stomach. Reykov imagined the dignitaries’ skin crawling right about now.

“Fire the E.M.P.”

Myakishev touched his control panel, and below them on the tower a twelve-foot-wide antenna swiveled toward the inbound. They all flinched when the pulse fired—

There was a near-simultaneous *snap* and a white flash. At first it seemed the snap came first, but now that it was over they weren’t sure.

In the distant sky, the Teardrop skittered on its trajectory, corkscrewed to one side, and plunged into the sea far off its mark, victim of a fizzled guidance system.

The bridge broke into cheers.

Reykov pumped a sigh of relief from his lungs. “Reenergize the pulse, Comrade Vasska.”

“Recharging now, Comrade Captain.”

“Good boy, good boy . . . ” Reykov inhaled deeply and tried to make the sensation of trouble go away. He wasn’t really nervous, but for some reason his hands were cold.

“Comrade Captain . . . ” Myakishev bent over the officer’s shoulders at the radar screen.

“Comrade?” Reykov prodded, his hands dropping to his sides.

Vasska, having heard something in Myakishev’s tone, was also bending over the radar station.

“We have an inbound . . . and it’s not one of ours.”

Vasska dove for the TBS phone and had it to his ear as Reykov barked, “Contact the *Vladivostok*.”

“Sir, Captain Feklenko reports they did not fire. They did *not* fire on us.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“What is it? Is it American?”

“Doesn’t appear to be.”

“Then what? Is it French? Is it British? Albanian? Do the Africans have missiles? Whose is it?”

“Sir, there’s no log of this . . . I’m not even certain it’s a missile,” Vasska said, snapping his fingers to other manned positions in silent orders.

Reykov pressed up against Myakishev’s shoulder. “Billions of rubles for you geniuses and you can’t tell me what it is. I want to know whose it is. What is coming in?”

“It’s headed directly toward us!”

Reykov straightened, his eyes narrowing on the distant sky. For the first time in his life, he made the kind of decision he hoped never to have to make.

“Turn the E.M.P. on it. Fire when ready.”

The wide rectangular antenna swiveled like the head of some unlikely insect, and once again the terrible *snap-flash* came as the electromagnetic pulse pumped through the atmosphere with scientific coldness.

It should have worked. It should have scrambled the guidance controls on any kind of missile or aircraft, any kind at all.

Any kind at all.

"It's homing in on the beam—accelerating now!" Myakishev's voice clattered against his throat.

Vasska whispered, "Even the Americans don't have anything like that . . . "

Reykov twisted around and plowed through the bridge crew to the chilly windowsill. He stared out over the Black Sea.

There was something there. It wasn't a missile.

On the horizon, making child's play of the distance between itself and *Gorshkov*, was a wall.

An electrical wall. It sizzled and crackled, made colors against the sky, shapeless and ugly—the phenomenon looked, more than anything, like an infrared false-color image. Colors inside colors. But there was no basic shape. It was crawling across the water, the size of a skyscraper.

Behind him, Myakishev choked, "Radar is out. Communications out now—we're getting feedback—"

Reykov gasped twice before he could speak. "Full about! General quarters! General—"

His voice went away. Around him, every piece of instrumentation went dead. As though molasses had been poured over the bridge, all mechanisms failed. There wasn't even the reassuring sound of malfunction. In fact, there was no sound at all.

Then a sound did come—an electrical scream cutting across the water and swallowing the whole ship as the false-color bogey roared up to the carrier's starboard bow and sucked the ship into itself. It was three times the size of the ship itself. *Three times*.

Reykov's last move as a human being was to turn toward the radar station. He looked at Timofei Vasska, who straightened up to stare at his captain, both hands clasped over his ears, and the two men were locked in a gaze, frozen, held. It felt as though all their blood were clotting at once.

Reykov's last perception was of Vasska's eyebrows drawing slightly together as the two men shared the wholeness of that final moment before obliteration.

Then Vasska's face was covered with the false-color image, and Reykov's mind, mercifully, stopped operating.

The false-color phenomenon drenched the aircraft carrier in its electrical wash. Within moments, there were no more life-forms on board. The immense vessel had been wiped clean of organisms, from the horde of humans to the smallest cockroach hiding in the cook's shoe. Even the leather on the seats in the captain's stateroom was gone.

There was only steel and wire and aluminum and titanium and the various fabrics—tarps and uniforms—that were recognizable as inert. The *Gorshkov* sat on the open water, empty.

The hull and the airfield it supported began to rumble, to vibrate. Ripples shot out from the hull at the waterline, creating patterns on the sea, and with every passing second the intensity of these vibrations mounted until *Gorshkov* was actually creating waves on the Black Sea.

The ship shook like a toy, shuddered, and was ripped in half as though made of chocolate cake. The shriek of tearing metal blared across the entire sea. Each piece of the ship became an individual explosion, a splotch of color inside the electrical vortex, and blew up like so many fragmentation grenades.

Ninety thousand gross tons of scrap metal rained across the waters of the Black Sea.

* * *

"Captain's on the bridge."

The U.S.S. *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN-71) churned through the sea at the

center of the six cruisers and seventeen destroyers that made up its carrier group. From where he came to a stop beside the navigation station on the bridge, Captain Leon Ruszkowski could easily see two of the Aegis cruisers plowing along at a distance of four miles off their forward and port beams.

"Nice," he murmured. "Blue sky, warm day, waters of the exotic Mediterranean beneath, and a song in our hearts. Ah, to be in Paris. Or Athens . . . hell, pick a city."

"Will coffee do?" Executive Officer David Galanter appeared, and sure enough the mocha scent of coffee, sugar/no cream, came with him.

The captain took the china mug and said, "Dave, you'll make a hell of a headwaiter someday. We'll all retire and open up a Greek restaurant in east L.A. Admiral Harper could be maître d' . . . Annalise can cook. . . ."

Air Wing Commander Annalise Drumm broke off her enchantment with the flattop and looked his way. "Do I get free breakfast?"

"Poached octopus on whole-wheat toast, our specialty."

She smiled and rolled her eyes. "After a while we could replace the octopus with those little pink erasers that come on the tops of navy pencils. Nobody'd know the difference."

"We'd probably get a write-up in *Connoisseur*. Dave, what's that blip?"

"Sorry, sir . . . one minute. Compton, check that."

The captain moved closer, squinting. "Gone now. What was it?"

Galanter shook his dark head and frowned. "Not sure, sir. All stations, verify integrity of the area."

A very subtle change came over the bridge. Highly trained crewmen moved into action so smoothly that the series of exercises was barely distinguishable from what went on when they were doing nothing.

Then the radar officer calmly said, "Picking up six blips, skipper . . . correction—seven blips. Seem to be fighters."

"Fighters from where? Annalise, you got hardware in the air I don't know about?"

Annalise crowded him at the monitor, suddenly possessive of their

airspace. “No, sir, all fixed-wings are in.”

The captain’s brows drew closer. “And the *Dwight Eisenhower*’s three thousand miles away. Get an ID, Compton.”

“They seem to be seven MiGs, sir. Signature radar says configuration is MiG-33B, Naval Version.”

“Are we under attack?”

“No, sir. Their missile radar is not on.”

“What are MiG-33s doing here? What happened? Who speaks Russian?”

“I do, sir,” Compton said without taking his eyes from his screen.

The captain didn’t hesitate. “Get on there and find out what’s up.”

“Uh, yessir.” He bantered into his comm set in Russian, and within seconds came back with, “Skipper, Soviet CAP is requesting permission to land on our flattop. Says they’re out of fuel. Coming in at high warble. Very agitated.”

Commander Drumm and the exec crowded the captain as he frowned and muttered, “Seven MiG-33s want to land on a U.S. CVN? Must be some bitchin’ reason. I don’t suppose we better wait for a note from Mother on this one.”

Galanter agreed with a cautious nod. “Out of fuel’s out of fuel.”

The captain watched the status boards and said, “Tell the Soviet squadron leader to dump all their missiles and bombs and empty their guns completely. Annalise, scramble four Tomcats to escort them in.”

“Aye, skipper.” She dashed for the exit so fast that they almost didn’t notice her leave until she was gone.

But the captain knew—he didn’t even bother to look. “Sound general quarters.”

Galanter’s voice got stiff. “Aye, sir. Bos’n, sound general quarters.”

“General quarters, aye.” The bosun immediately went to his broadcast intercom, pierced the ship with an alert whistle, and sent the deceptively calm order booming through the two thousand airtight chambers on the carrier. *“General quarters. General quarters. Man your*

battle stations. This is not a drill. Man your battle stations. This is no drill."

Captain Ruszkowski didn't wait for the stirring announcement to stop, because that would take several minutes. Throughout the ship, thousands of trained men and women were streaking toward their posts, all blood running hot with a thrill that inevitably comes from hearing those words over the intercom. No matter how awful or how dangerous, there was always the thrill. It was part and parcel of the voodoo that made things work on a military vessel.

Ruszkowski kept quiet just a few more seconds until he heard the distinct *kkssshhhhhhhoooooo* of F-14s peeling off the flight deck in succession so quick it was scary. That was a good sound, and he started breathing again. "Scan for any vessels in a thousand-mile radius. I want to know if this is a fake."

Compton turned in his chair. "Sir?"

"Go, Compton."

"Russian wing commander says three bags full, sir. They'll comply with dumping their arms and anything else you want."

"Ask the squadron leader what kind of arresting gear he has, then tell him what we've got and see if they're compatible. We'll have to know if their tailhookers are up to speed or if we have to rig a barricade."

Galanter straightened. "Should we tell them that? I mean, isn't that classified?"

"Yeah, but I don't really care. And signal our picket destroyer that they might have to go in after the MiGs if we can't hook them and they have to ditch."

"Soviet CAP leader says he's willing to comply unconditionally on all counts, sir. He sounds pretty shook up."

"Signal they have permission to land, Mr. Compton. Dave, let's bring those pilots in."

It had never in all the history of the universe been so hot. An eerie yellow light flashed on and off, picking up the roundness of tiny beads of perspiration on the woman's ivory skin. Some of the beads caught

on the ends of her long black eyelashes as she lay there with her eyes tightly shut. The glow was spasmodic, on, off, on, off.

Her eyes shot open. Her hands gnawed the edges of the mattress. Her back was suddenly stiff from sitting up so quickly, yet she had absolutely no memory of having sat up. Beneath her uniform, perspiration rolled down between her breasts, as though someone had dumped a beaker of glycerin over her shoulders.

“Don’t fire . . . shut down all systems . . . Vasska . . . Vasska!”

She was gasping. Several seconds thundered by under the terrible flash of the yellow light before her eyes focused on the delicate floral arrangement on her dresser.

“Yellow alert . . . yellow alert . . . ”

She turned her head, blinking tears from her eyes, and undone black hair moved on her shoulders, reminding her of who she was. She tried to catch at her identity as it slipped in and out of her mind, to draw it in, cling to it—

“Yellow alert . . . yellow alert . . . Counselor Troi, please report to the bridge immediately. Counselor Deanna Troi, report to the bridge please. Yellow alert . . . yellow alert . . . ”

Chapter Two

"Fire Phasers."

Captain Picard's precise enunciation gave the order a theatrical tenor. It was followed almost immediately by the thunder of weapons powering through the big ship. A slim, magisterial man of thrifty movement, Picard stood the deck without pacing as most would, watching the latest of a series of rather tedious scientific exercises.

In the corner of his eye he saw the yellow alert light flashing, and it reminded him that stations had been manned and any quick shifts in orbital integrity could be handled without surprise now. "Orbital status, Mr. LaForge?"

As he spoke, Picard crossed the topaz carpet to bridge center and glanced over the shoulder of Geordi LaForge, ignoring—through practice—the fact that the dark young man had a metal band over his eyes that made him appear blindfolded. There was something ironic and disconcerting—to humans—about trusting the steering of a gigantic ship to a blind man.

LaForge's head moved, downward slightly and left—it was their only signal that visual tie-in to his brain was working at all. "An orbit this tight is tricky since gas giants have no true surface, sir, but we're stable and holding. I guess the Federation's going to get all the information it wants whether we like it or not."

Picard moved quietly to the other side of LaForge and placed his hand on the young officer's lounge. "When I want an editorial, I'll ask for it, Lieutenant."

LaForge stiffened. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

The captain imperiously guarded his own opinion. Though the huge new starship was supposedly on an exploratory mission, the Federation was dragging its feet in letting the *Enterprise* get on with it. The ship had yet to push into truly unexplored space, and Picard was

annoyed by the giant gas planet turning on the room-sized viewscreen before him. All right, it was an anomaly. Yes, it was unique. Yes, it was large. But if the Federation Science Bureau wanted to study it, surely the planet wasn't going anywhere. They needn't take up an entire Galaxy-class ship to have a look at it.

"Mr. Riker, secure from yellow alert. Go to condition three."

William Riker came to life up on the quarterdeck. "Condition three, aye, sir." He started to look toward the tactical station, where the order would be funneled through, but at the last instant left it to the officer in charge, for his own gaze was fixed on Jean-Luc Picard.

The captain regarded his bridge and its people and their task with the stateliness of a bird on a bough. Not a bird of prey, though, this captain. This one could soar in any direction, whichever way duty demanded. Not a large man or even an imposing one—a task he left to his first officer—the captain was at times unobtrusive, the bird hiding in the foliage, watching, never seen until those great wings suddenly spread. Those around him knew this could happen at any moment, this sudden peeling off across the bridge panorama like a lean sky thing. Even in repose, his presence kept them alert.

I wish I could do that, Riker thought, a little wince crossing his broad features. He tried not to watch the captain while the captain was watching the bridge, but it was hypnotic. As usual, Riker's back was hurting as he stood to starboard, too rigidly. He wished he could shake the habit of prancing, born of deep-seated little insecurities that nagged at him constantly as though to keep him in line. Later he always wished he hadn't moved so punctiliously as he got from here to there. Horrible to risk the captain's thinking he was being deliberately upstaged. Next selection: "First Officer on Parade."

But worse . . . if the first officer appeared diffident. Wasn't that worse? There was no middle ground, or at least Riker hadn't found it. He wanted to be a bulwark, but not one the captain had to climb over.

It was tiring, pretending to be completely one with a commanding officer whom he simply didn't know very well on a personal basis. Yet they faced the prospect of sharing the next few years at each other's side. Could that be done on the plane of formality that had set itself up between them?

Riker tried to pace the bridge casually yet without appearing aimless. That was the tricky part. It actually hurt sometimes—his back, his

legs, aching. Like now. If not done right, the movements became pompous and ambiguous. He would become victim to the plain fact that the first officer actually had conspicuously little to do on the bridge. He worried about that all the time. Good thing he generally had command of away teams; at least he had that to make him worthwhile.

Picard had it down. Quiet authority. Dependable not-quite presence. They could easily forget he was on the bridge at all. He would simply watch from his bough.

Riker forced himself to look away from the captain's coin-relief profile before he was entirely mesmerized.

"Something wrong, Mr. Riker?"

Caught.

Riker turned and drew his mouth into a grin that must have looked forced—another mistake—and said, "Not at all, sir. Everything's fine." He felt his eyes squinting and didn't want the grin to get out of hand, so he pursed his lips and pretended to be very interested in the tactical display.

Good—the captain was looking away. *Relax, Riker. Down with one shoulder. Now the other. Good soldier.*

A casual turn told him no one was looking at him. Everyone was busy with the giant.

A moment later he was hypnotized again, but this time it was not by the subdued presence of Captain Picard. Now the gas giant caught him, held him, cradled in its unparalleled blueness as it roiled before them on the wide ceiling-to-floor viewscreen.

Ah, that viewscreen. It was the only thing on this ship that truly conveyed the size of the vessel and its technological grandeur. Dominating the bridge, the screen was half a universe all by itself.

The other half was over Riker's shoulder: the new *Enterprise*. Barely broken in, swan-elegant, she spread out behind him like the wings of the bird.

Birds. Everything's birds all of a sudden, Riker thought, and he glanced at Jean-Luc Picard.

“Condition report, Mr. Data,” the captain requested then, directing his gaze to the primary science station aft of tactical.

Riker turned aft in time to see a slender humanoid straighten at the science post. The face was still startling, its doll-like pyrite sheen softened only by its sculpted expression. Data’s expression, when there was one, always carried a childlike naïveté that eased the severeness of his slicked-back hair and the cartoon colors of his skin. For the hundredth time, Riker involuntarily wondered why anybody smart enough to create an android so intricate was too stupid to paint its face the right color or put some tone on its lips. If his builders filled it with human data—pardon the pun—somewhere in the download must have been information that the palette of human skin types didn’t include chrome. It was as though they went out of the way to shape him like a human, then went even further out of the way to paste him with signs that said, “Hey, I’m an android!”

Data’s brushstroke brows lifted. “Readings coming in from phaser blast echoes now, sir. Absolutely lifeless—high concentrations of uncataloged chemical compounds, very compressed . . . extremely rare reactology, Captain. This information will prove valuable.”

“Is there a margin of safety to attempt probing through to the gas giant’s core?” Picard asked.

Data’s face was framed by the black mantle of the slenderizing one-piece flightsuit, its color picked up again by the breast panel’s mustard gold, a standard Starfleet color since the Big Bang. “A wide margin, sir. I recommend it.”

Riker pressed his arms to his sides. There was something unreal about Data’s voice. More human than human, the words were rounded and spoken with an open throat, as though it was always working a little harder than necessary.

“He.” Not “it.” For the sake of the rest of the crew, think “he.” No sense rupturing the trust others might have by accidentally pointing out the fact that he’s an instrument, even if he is. Riker shook himself from his thoughts as he sensed Picard’s glance, and in that moment he collected the authority he needed to carry out the captain’s unspoken order.

He cleared his throat. “Increase phasers to full power. Let’s see what’s at the heart of this beauty.”

“It is beautiful, isn’t it? You don’t stumble on one of these every day,”

Beverly Crusher commented. Folding her long arms, she sat on the bench just port of the counselor's seat, exercising a ship's surgeon's traditional right to be on the bridge when she didn't feel like being anywhere else. Dr. Crusher was yet another stroke of color against the bisque walls and carpet. Over her cobalt-and-black uniform her hair was a Cleopatra crown of pure terra cotta—and there was just *something* about a redhead. She was reedy and quick, smart and graceful, and inclined toward sensible shoes in spite of her narrow-boned loveliness. Riker liked her. So did the captain. Especially the captain.

"Yes," Captain Picard murmured, using the conversation as an excuse to move a few steps closer to her, "and it's twice the size of common gas giants. Fire phasers."

The muted *phhhiiiuuuuuu* hummed through the ship again, and on the screen an energy bolt cut downward into the surfaceless swirl.

"Reading various concentrations of gas," Data reported, "merging to liquid . . . compressing into solid masses in some areas . . . logging the compounds now, sir."

"Excellent," Picard responded. "I'm sure—"

The forward turbolift beside the captain's ready-room door opened, and Deanna Troi flew out onto the bridge, so unlike herself that she drew all eyes. She was a wreck—about as opposite her usual demeanor as she could get without mud-wrestling first. Her hair, usually knotted up in a style so tight it made other people's muscles ache, was a black mass, spilling over her shoulders and around her pearly cheeks. Her eyes, extra large with their touch of alienness, obsidian as eyes that looked out from a Greco-Roman fresco, were skewed by some terrible calamity. She was breathing hard. Had she run down every corridor?

Riker plowed through the bridge contingent to the space just below her platform. "Deanna . . . what's wrong?"

She panted out a few breaths, her pencil-perfect brows drawn inward to make two creases over her nose. "Why . . . why is there a yellow alert?"

Even now she spoke softly, her words touched with that faintly alien Betazoid accent. She was working hard to compose herself, but something was obviously pressuring her.

Riker moved a step closer, hoping to reassure her. “We’re attempting close orbit around that.” He made a gesture toward the viewscreen, but his mind wasn’t on it any more than hers was. He parted his lips to say something else, but Data was interrupting him.

“We’re firing into its atmosphere to get feedback readings. Even though its core is unignited, the planet is putting out three times the energy it should, mostly in long-wave radiation. We have to be on alert in case of shock waves or gravitational recoil—”

“Data,” Riker snapped, wishing there was an off switch. He silenced the android with a sandpaper look, then turned back to Troi. “I should’ve told the computer to bypass standard procedure and not call you up here. It’s my fault.”

She put out her hand in what began as an appeasing gesture, but as she spoke it turned into the kind of move a woman makes when she wants to steady herself. “No . . . it isn’t your fault. . . .”

The captain floated in at Riker’s left. “What’s bothering you, Counselor?” he asked, gently but with an edge of impatience.

Her kohled eyes narrowed beneath those drawn brows. “I heard something . . . in my mind . . . ”

“Can you describe it?” Riker asked. A twinge ran up his spine. Her muted telepathic talents always made him nervous. It wasn’t exactly disbelief, because no one could dispute the existence of Betazoid mental traits, but it was a kind of distrust.

She backed up a step. “I’m sorry . . . ” She blinked, took a deep breath, and pretended to recover. “Captain, I’m sorry for the interruption. I didn’t mean to disturb your tests. Please excuse me.”

Before either of the men could speak, she made a quick and nervous exit.

Riker stared at the lift doors. “I’ve never seen her act that way,” he murmured.

Data rose and came a few steps toward the ramp. “Is Counselor Troi ill?”

“It’s something else,” Riker decided quietly, more to himself than to Data.

“She behaved abnormally.”

Now he drew his eyes from the lift and struck Data with a look that would have bruised had it been a Ghost Ship blow. “I don’t think you’re anyone to judge,” he barked.

Picard tilted his shoulders as he turned, saying, “Permission to leave the bridge, Number One. Temporarily.”

“Thank you, sir,” Riker said. “I won’t be long.” He had to restrain himself or he would actually have bounded for the lift. He cast one more acid glare at Data before leaving the bridge.

Picard smoothed the moment with a calm extension of the science tests. “Continue phaser bursts at regular intervals.”

Data drew himself away from the stinging, confusing reaction Riker had given him and settled into his usual station at OPS on the forward deck. “Science stations are receiving continual information from the planetary core now, Captain.” He lowered his voice as he had often heard humans do, and to LaForge said, “Commander Riker is annoyed with me.”

LaForge shrugged. He glanced at the android, but saw not what human eyes would see. The android’s bodily heat was unevenly distributed throughout the high-tech body, a body far denser than that of a human body of equal volume. The sections of infrared were localized into hot spots, more defined than the infrared blobs in a human body, and LaForge could easily discern the places where organic material was fitted in to intricate mechanics. Data gave off an electromagnetic aura, but he wasn’t exactly a toaster oven.

“You could try being a little less stiff,” LaForge suggested. “Learn some slang or something.”

Data’s lips flattened. “Slang. Colloquial jargon, nonstandard idioms, street talk . . . it’s often inaccurate. I have tried to incorporate that speech into my language use, but it does not seem to flow.”

“That’s because you use it as though it still has quotation marks around it. You use individual words instead of the whole meaning of the phrase. You’ve got to try to use slang more casually.”

“What purpose does it actually serve?”

LaForge leaned toward him and delicately said, “It makes you

approachable. Give it a swing."

As his lips silently traced that last word, a perplexed expression overtook Data's features. Unlike the times when he worked too hard at his expressions and ended up looking like a vaudeville clown, these moments made him look much more human than any he could force, these moments when unexpected emotion simply popped up on his face. "Swing . . . a child's toy, a sweeping maneuver—oh! An effort. A try. Yes, swing. I'll swing. Computer, show me all available dictionary and dialect banks on Earth slang, rapid feed."

The computer came to life on the panel before him and its soft feminine voice, in a delivery much more at ease than Data's own, asked, *"What era's slang would you like, and what language?"*

Geordi LaForge settled back into his lounge and mumbled, "I always thought you needed a hobby."

Abruptly there was a sound on the quarterdeck, something akin to a growl, but as quickly it was gone and replaced by the resonant bass of Lieutenant Worf as he stared at his monitor.

"Not possible!"

Captain Picard drew his attention away from the blue giant and approached his own command chair, behind which the horseshoe rail arched upward and across the tactical console. Past that, Worf stood with his back to the bridge, staring at his status monitor as though his dissatisfaction could bore right through it. Of course, with a Klingon, that might very well be the case.

Pulling up the automatic extra measure of calmness he found himself using with Worf, Picard urged, "Lieutenant? Something?"

"I'm not sure I saw it," the Klingon spat.

But Security Chief Tasha Yar twisted her toned body without taking her hands off her tactical console and told him, "I saw it too."

"Saw what?" Picard demanded.

"An energy pulse, Captain." The girl pushed back a lock of her boy-cropped blond hair. "A huge one. Across the entire solar system."

Only one step carried Worf all the way forward to Tasha's side. "Very sharp and powerful, sir, a refractive scan. Like an instant sensor

sweep."

"It was too quick-fire for sensors," Tasha shot back.

"Then what?" Worf boomed. "There's no trace of it now."

Picard used their argument to cloak his movement up the ramp to tactical, where he peered over the controls. There was nothing showing. "Could it have been an aberration? Feedback from our experiments?"

"Sir, it came from outside the solar system," Tasha said, her throat tightening around her voice as it always did when she let herself get excited.

"Track it."

"Nothing left to track," Worf said coarsely.

Picard raised his head. "Don't use that tone with me, Lieutenant. There is no crisis yet."

Worf's big brown face didn't look in the least apologetic, given a particularly animalistic texture by the riblike cranium of his Klinzhai racial background, the strain which had emerged dominant during the last Klingon purge. He was imposing; in fact, he was downright terrifying, because the other crew members could always see that controlling himself was plain work for him and someday he just might lose the fight.

"Sorry, sir," he rumbled. "It was there during our last phaser burst, then it was gone." He placed his big hands on the tactical board and burned a glare through the forward screen. "I don't like it. It's like being watched."

Picard stood back on his heels for a contemplative moment, his handsome eyes wedging. "Could be another vessel. Let's make sure they don't miss us. Saying hello is part of our job. Put sensors on wide scan. Lieutenant Data, you handle broadcast of standard hailing frequency with greetings in all interstellar languages and codes as well as automatic universal translation."

"I'm hopping to it."

"Lieutenant LaForge, take us out of orbit. Disband further testing of the gas giant until we ascertain the trim of the solar system."

“Aye, sir. Disengaging orbital condition.” LaForge pressed his fingers to the signal controls on the beautiful board at wrist level and just that easily drew the massive starship out of the gas giant’s gravitational envelope. During that maneuver, while the ship was safely under control of the navigational computer, he took a moment to glance left to Data.

When he looked at the other crew members, he saw the layerings of infrared that he could intensify as needed, he saw blood running through arteries, arterioles, capillaries, and so on, but he saw them better than a computer would because his brain acted as interpreter and he was more intuitive than any computer. Over that infrared image, like a nylon stocking drawn over a mannequin, he saw skin and a hazy shine of fine skin hairs. The mannequin appeared to be lighted from within, and had a slight glow.

But Data—Data was a work of art. Geordi alone could see the exotic materials, brilliantly blended, the different levels of heat and coolness, the different densities where metal met synthetic, where synthetic met organism, and where all meshed. He saw the density of Data’s body, and all the million tiny electrical impulses that kept him working and ran like swarms of insects through his body when he worked a little harder or concentrated a little more or called up more strength. But it wasn’t like looking at the computer stations before them or the mechanism behind the wall at the coffee/food dispenser. Not at all. Those were machines.

LaForge sometimes got the feeling that people forgot he could hear too. He had listened to Riker’s tone just before the first officer left the bridge. He had heard the flutter in Data’s voice when he mentioned that Riker wasn’t too pleased with him. Data was mechanical, but to Geordi LaForge he was no machine.

Geordi allowed himself an indulgent gaze at Data’s face as the android glowed with concentration. He saw the structure of synthetic facial bone, tiny blood-fed fibrous ligaments attached to impulse interpreters, stockinged by the cool involucrum that was his skin. Geordi saw a handsome face, unafraid of its own features, a face that could show many feelings, from courage to calculation, confusion to compassion, to those sensitive enough to see its minute changes. And Data’s eyes, no matter their brimstone cast, were unfailingly gentle.

Geordi shook his head and uttered, “Machine, my ass.”

Picard looked up. “Lieutenant?”

“Secure distance, sir.”

“Speak up, then.”

“Yes, sir.”

The door’s buzzer sounded clearly, but Troi didn’t respond to it. Once again lights played across her face, but not the lights of yellow alert. She sat at her private desk, watching a holograph simulate the motion of a patch of blue ocean water. At the ends of the foot-wide holograph, the ocean faded and became table. Dead center on the patch of churning water was a three-dimensional image of an old military vessel. It was wedge-shaped, piled high with steel-gray metal mountings that made no sense to her. On the screen at her wrist came the simple description: *First iron screw steamship, S.S.* Great Britain.

She frowned and tapped the continue button. The 3-D image sucked in on itself as though imploded, twisted around a little, and reanimated into something utterly different, something bigger, flatter, clunkier, chugging across her table. The dark band of screen beneath it said: *Tanker*, Edmund Fitzgerald, *lost with all hands, Lake Superior, Michigan, United States, Earth 1975*.

Troi hit the button almost angrily. Those weren’t right. They weren’t right. A new image came almost instantly, a big black, white, and red ship, very elegant and slim this time, obviously meant to carry people. People—that was right. She looked at the display band. *Luxury liner* Queen Elizabeth II*, Cunard Line, Earth.*

No . . . no . . . Troi’s mulberry-tinted lips lost their perfect shape. No. Her finger moved again.

H.M.S. Dreadnought, *battleship, Great Britain, Earth, 1906.*

She leaned forward now as she recognized some element—the color, the demeanor of this ship . . . closer. She tapped the button again, this time saying, “This type of vessel.”

“*This is a naval defense/offense vessel which would be used during and after World War One,*” the computer courteously told her.

“Continue.”

The holograph winked, and she was gazing at another ship of the

same kind, but from a different angle as it crashed through the little round patch of sea. Its slate-gray bow rose and fell in the sea. The computer image turned as though Troi were circling it in an aircraft, to give her a complete look at it from all angles. It had a crude kind of grace about it, certainly a strength, but it had no lights at all, no colors like the starship's sparkling yellow and white lights, its glowing reds, its vibrant electrical blues.

Aegis cruiser, built by SYSCON for the U.S. Navy, Earth, 1988.

The door buzzed again.

"Oh—yes; come in."

She let the old-style ship pierce its way through the tiny sea in front of her as she looked up to see Will Riker stride in. As soon as the door opened, his eyes were already locked with hers. How long had he been waiting out there? She faintly remembered now that the buzzer had sounded once before.

"I was worried about you," he said. He settled into the other chair and leaned one elbow on the desk just short of the holograph. The bulky cruiser splashed toward him, and yet stayed right where it was. "I didn't know you were a history buff." He nodded at the Aegis. "That's nice."

Troi tilted her dark head. "I've never seen anything like this before."

So that was the end of the easy transition, Riker realized. Something in her tone told him her statement was more significant than it pretended to be.

"What happened?" he asked, no longer protecting her from her own behavior on the bridge.

She gave him an uncharacteristic shrug with one shoulder and shook her head, a self-conscious smile tugging at her lips. "Did you see what I did? I'm so embarrassed. I've never mistaken a dream for reality before. I must really have looked funny. Did anyone laugh?"

"Laugh?" Riker said saucily. "You should've seen them. Captain Picard had to be wheeled off the bridge, Worf was—"

"Oh, you!" She swatted his nearest knee and chuckled at herself again.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Riker told her, lounging his big frame

back in the chair. “Everybody does something like that sooner or later. The more stoic you are, the worse the goof-up seems.”

“Am I stoic?” she asked, the smile broadening again.

“I don’t know, Counselor,” he said. “I don’t remember the last time I looked at you and only saw the professional. I’ve got more flowery things to remember about you.”

Troi pursed her lips, leaned forward, ignoring the holograph of the ship as it continued its nonvoyage, and propped her chin on one hand. “Tell me, Bill. Make me feel better.”

“No fair. Figure it out for yourself. You of all people could do it.”

Settling back, she said, “That’s not very comforting for a person who just dashed onto the bridge in a frenzy.”

Will Riker’s bright eyes flashed before her impishly. “You want comfort? How’s this? I was assigned as second officer on a destroyer right after my promotion to lieutenant commander—about a thousand years ago, if memory serves. I got my assignment at Starbase Eighteen, and keyed the coordinates to the new ship into the transporter, stepped on the pad, and boom, there I was. I strutted around being the almighty second officer, puffed up just like a souffle, and we were ten hours out of spacedock before I figured out I had beamed myself onto the wrong departing ship.”

“Oh, Bill! Oh, no . . . ”

“And the ship I’d landed on wasn’t a destroyer, either. It was the U.S.S. *Yorktown*—an Excelsior-class starship, heading out on a two-year mission. Her captain made Picard seem like Francis of Assisi. They’d already been delayed four days by diplomatic entanglements, and here’s Second Officer Riker having to report to the *real* second officer.”

Her hand was clapped over her mouth by now, and she parted her fingers enough to burble, “What did they do?”

He spread his hands. “What could they do? They turned the whole ship around, this huge ship, and they came all the way back through space to rendezvous with the destroyer I was supposed to be on. So there was the destroyer, having to meet a starship just to pick up its second officer, who was supposed to have reported in ten hours before.”

“Oh, dear . . . ”

“So quit complaining.”

“Is that a true story? You’re not making it up to make me feel better?”

“Make it up? Deanna, nobody sane could make up anything that punishing. It’s like a practical joke somebody plays on a bridegroom on his wedding night, except I did it to myself.” Shaking his head musingly, he added, “I could never quite look at a transporter platform the same way again. I always wonder if I’m going to end up beaming into somebody’s shower by mistake. And the worst was yet to come. Two years later, I really was assigned as *Yorktown*’s second officer and I had to report to that captain *again*!”

She giggled, bringing an unlikely girlishness to her demeanor. “Did he remember?”

“Remember? First thing he asked was if I’d been hiding in the hold all this time.”

Their laughter entwined and filled the dim room, chasing away the discomfort.

As Riker watched her custodially, he noticed she had picked up on his feelings and was actually doing the blushing for him. At first he was tempted to draw back within himself, but he knew it didn’t matter. With Deanna, holding back showed up like a beacon. There was no point. He wished he could be this relaxed with the other members of the crew.

They sat together, grinning at each other, warm in their mutual memories and the privacy of a relationship and a past they had allowed no one else on board to see. It was like starting fresh, with a whole new life, with their attraction to each other getting a second chance, because no one else knew. No one else on the entire ship *knew*.

Breaking his gaze at her gentle face, Riker looked at the unlikely holograph beside him and asked, “You had a nightmare?”

Her expression made his smile fall away. He forced himself not to say more, to give her a chance to answer in her own time, while he indulged in the presence of her troubled onyx eyes.

“A nightmare,” she murmured. “But in this nightmare I could feel the

emotions of the strangers in it. It was nothing I recognize . . . sharp images of things I know nothing about. Names I've never heard."

Riker perked up. "What names?"

She drew the memory up and forced herself to speak. "There was Vasska, Arkady, Gork . . . Gorsha . . . I don't know those sounds. And I don't understand why I would hear names. I can't do that. I can only read some emotions. I've never been able to draw complete communication."

He inched a little closer. "But you're Betazoid. What's so surprising if you can—"

"I *can't*. I never could," she insisted, wondering if she could make him comprehend. "You don't understand what it means to communicate with a silent mind. You don't know the trouble, the discomfort of dealing with races that can't shield their thoughts. It's as if a sighted person suddenly enters a world of chaotic lights and colors, or a hearing person suddenly comes into a place that was nothing but uncontrolled noises. The light would be blinding, the din maddening . . . I've worked hard to separate my own thoughts from those of others, Bill, and I've done well at it. You can see why it disturbs me that I'm experiencing something so unfamiliar."

"Deanna, it was a dream," he told her soothingly, cupping her hand under his.

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "But it wasn't," she insisted. "At least . . . not entirely."

He believed her. Deanna Troi was the quintessence of professionalism and not given to the flights of personality often displayed by her Betazoid race. Without a pause he asked, "Have you asked the computer to trace the names?"

Troi lounged back in her chair, finally relaxing. "Computer off."

The holograph gave an electrical snap, sucked down into a tiny core of light like a balloon suddenly losing all its air, and winked out.

"Have you?" he prodded.

"I suppose I'll have to."

"Why do you say it that way?"

“I don’t like to give in to dreams.”

Riker gazed at her, dubious.

Without giving him time to formulate a response to that, she asked, “Bill, what do you think? Do you think I might utilize my talents better in some other way?”

“You don’t mean leave the ship, do you? You aren’t thinking about that.”

“Perhaps,” she said, “if that’s how I can best serve the Federation.”

Desperation struck him. As much as he had—yes—avoided her, as afraid as he was that their past liaison would cloud his effectiveness as first officer, the prospect of her vanishing from his life suddenly cut him like a blade. “Don’t you like it here?” he asked, careful of his tone. “Don’t you like starship duty?”

“Oh, I like it very much,” she said. “Oh, yes, very much. But there are times . . . can you imagine what it’s like to stand on the bridge and realize I have nothing to do?”

With another shake of his head, Riker tapped a finger on the table and blurted, “Can I imagine it? I don’t have to. It’s the legacy of first officers the universe across. If you look up *first officer* in the marine dictionary, it says ‘do not open till crisis.’ Listen, it takes time for a new position to evolve. When we actually turn to exploratory missions, I think you’ll find yourself up to your chin in work. Keeping us sane in deep space—that’s hardly nothing. A ship’s psychologist is second only to the chief surgeon on deep-space missions.”

She smiled softly at his sincere effort, and murmured, “Where does that put the ship’s telepath?”

To this, Riker had no ready answer.

Troi sensed his concern and forced up a partial smile to ease his worry. She fell into his wide blue eyes as she had so long ago, and crashed through them just as the holographic cruiser crashed through its patch of blue sea. How could she make him understand? Could any human understand how uneasy she was, all the time? She knew people were uncomfortable around her because they thought of her as a kind of voyeur, always peeking through the keyholes of their thoughts. Mind slut, some called her. Many avoided her, so she had always tried to be more businesslike and stoic about her extremely

businesslike talent—and even that practice had backfired.

Cold, they called her. An *unfeeling* mind slut.

How could she tell him that a crowded corridor was an empty place for Deanna Troi? Barren and lonely. She made such an effort to hide inside herself that she had become insulated from everything but their eyes, accused of a crime she refused to commit. Among her own people she could no longer go unrestrained; having built her discipline almost obsessively, she could no longer drop it for the short times she spent among Betazoids. Thus lost in both communities, misinterpreted by each as too aloof, she had become a woman of feelings who walked forever alone.

Even now she hid those truths from William Riker and his gentle waves of concern.

She swallowed imperceptibly and parted her lips. “Now I ask you—what’s the matter? What disturbs you?” She could both sense and see him weighing whether or not to tell her what he was thinking, then almost immediately he changed his mind.

“I don’t like to see you experiencing hurts that aren’t your own,” he admitted. “It doesn’t seem fair.”

“It’s my nature,” Troi told him. “My heritage from my mother’s people. It’s the nature of telepathy. Oh, I could shut my mind, become more alone, as you are, but I’ve found my way to be useful. I’m lucky, you see,” she said, forcing a smile. “I can experience the emotions yet remain objective about them.”

He thought of the strange ship that had just clicked out of being on the table beside them and shrugged. “I guess I never thought about it that way.”

She pulled her hand from under his, then put it on top of his and pressed down gently. “There is more than hurt to be felt, you know. I can also feel love.”

Riker allowed himself a sentimental smile. For an isolated moment they shared something that neither was completely sure still existed between them anymore. The magnetism was undeniable, but at the same instant it pierced him with its own dangers.

“I can’t stay,” he said. “I have to go back up there and act indispensable.”

“I know.”

He crooked his forefinger under her chin. “Try to relax. We all have that kind of dream sometimes. I just wanted to be sure you were all right.”

Troi smiled warmly. “I’m all right.”

He squeezed her hand, somehow feeling he hadn’t quite accomplished what he came in here for. Well, no point dragging it out to the maudlin. Stepping toward the door, he made what he thought was a clumsy exit.

The door brushed open, then closed automatically behind him, leaving him alone in the corridor as he took a stride or two toward the bridge turbolift—

And braked hard.

There was someone in front of him. He’d sworn the corridor was empty an instant ago. The air was chilled, heavy.

The man was big, almost as big as Riker. And maybe fifteen years older. His eyes were ready for Riker’s, and didn’t flicker away, but remained steadily focused. A wave of silver was the only inconsistency in his thick dark hair, and there was a uniform cap tucked under his arm. Yes—he was wearing a uniform, a dark blue uniform of some kind.

Riker vaguely recognized the style, but it was almost a “racial” kind of memory rather than something from his own experience.

The man’s pale lips separated without moisture. His face worked as though to speak, but there was an invisible wall between them. There was no sound, no sensation of warmth—in fact there was now a distinct chill in the corridor.

The large man, standing straight and proper, lifted a hand toward Riker, beckoning. Or perhaps asking—a gesture of entreaty—but then his handsome face crumpled, his brow knitting tightly, brackets of frustration forming on either side of his mouth.

Riker was as a man chained during those moments. He might have believed anything when the other man’s form slowly turned gauzy, thinned, and disappeared.

Chapter Three

"CAPTAIN, I'M PICKING UP an energy blip. . . ."

Tasha Yar caught back her voice and grimaced at her readout board, confused. A flop of bangs had come back over her eyes as though to insist some part of her would always rebel against the discipline. Her delicate Lithuanian complexion blotched slightly around her cheekbones as she willed the instruments to start giving her sensible information, especially when Captain Picard appeared at her side and looked down at those same instruments.

"It's gone now," she told him bitterly. "How can that be? Worf, do you have anything?"

"Nothing," the Klingon thundered, redoubling her impatience. "I *don't* like it."

"Steady, both of you," Picard said. The readings looked absolutely normal. These two hotheads were dependable, but the doubting Thomas side of him wished he himself or Data or LaForge had also happened to see this flicker of energy Worf and Yar claimed had been there.

Suddenly Yar struck her board with the heels of her hands and shouted, "There it is again! But it's inside the ship!" She slammed the intercom without consulting Picard. "Security to Deck Twelve, Section A-three!"

"Inside?" Picard stepped closer. "Are you sure?"

"It's gone again!"

"Check your instruments for malfunction. Worf, do the same with long-range sensors."

Yar took a deep breath. "Aye, sir."

"Checking," Worf said, much less embarrassed than Yar was.

Picard straightened. “And call Mr. Riker to the bridge.”

Troi continued to gaze thoughtfully at the empty space where the holograph ships had been chugging across her table. Her gaze was unfocused, contemplative, and though she had tried to raise her hand several times to press the Revive and Continue point on her computer board, something stopped her every time. Nor could she make herself ask the computer to continue. Continue giving in.

A dream. But not one formed within her own mind, of that much she was becoming certain.

The door opened again, this time without the polite buzzer, and Riker strode back in. Troi gained almost instant control over her troubled expression.

Teasing him with her eyes, she asked, “Have you been hiding in the hold all this time?”

“How much power are you feeding into that unit?” Riker asked her.

She blinked. “Pardon me?”

He stopped, his thigh just brushing the edge of the table. “Your holographs. They’re bleeding out.”

She started to respond, but was cut off by the intercom.

“Commander Riker, your presence is requested on the bridge. Report to the bridge, please.”

Riker touched his insignia com. “Riker. I’ll be right there.”

He brought his attention back to Troi. “Your history lesson. It’s bleeding out into the corridor.”

Her lips touched and parted as she tried to understand what he was saying and to find the right answer. His expression, his tone somehow made her think there should be an answer and she hated to make him feel as silly as his statement sounded—but what was he talking about?

Finally she steadied herself and coolly said, “But that’s not possible.”

Riker shifted to his other foot. “Of course it is. You should have maintenance check the energy intake on this thing.”

Working to avoid the inevitable, Troi tried not to feel responsible. "No," she said, "it can't be. Don't you remember? I turned it off before you left. I haven't turned it back on."

Without really changing very much, Riker's federal-blue eyes took on a perplexed hardness that wasn't directed toward her at all, but toward a sudden mystery. His mouth tightened over the cleft chin so slightly that she might have missed it had she not been watching for changes.

Troi knotted her hands on her lap and resisted the urge to touch him. Caught by the ominous perception in his eyes, she added, "Completely cold . . . "

"This is crazy," Yar complained. She flattened her tiny mouth into a hard ribbon and forced herself to report in a more correct manner to her waiting captain. "Security reports no unusual activity on Deck Twelve at all, Captain. My instruments are in perfect working order. I don't understand this."

On the forward bridge, Captain Picard had his back to Conn and Ops and didn't see Data start to open his mouth to add his two bits, or see LaForge gesture at the android to keep quiet. Everyone else saw the motion and understood its prudence, especially when Picard raised his voice and roared, "That's quite enough of this waffling about. Next time the glitch appears, I want the computers on this vessel ready to record it. We've got the most advanced technology available to the Federation incorporated into the memory core and active matrices of this vessel, and you people are still relying on intuition and your own eyes. Now, snap to and let the ship do its job."

His tone indisputably said that he didn't mean they should let the ship do their jobs *for* them, but that they should be doing their jobs better, more completely meshing with the systems beneath their hands. Picard was simply the kind of commanding officer who didn't like to have anything out of line.

He swung around, glaring at the main viewer as though he were looking for something and couldn't find it, as though he could coerce an answer out of the darkness of space, and mused, "Too damned young."

The port turbolift came open and Riker stepped out, escorting Troi by the elbow. Odd . . . she still looked unprepared to come to the bridge,

her hair still down, her casual short uniform on instead of the usual one-piece she had taken to wearing most often and the two of them stood together before Picard, their faces troubled.

“Captain,” Riker asked, “may we have a word with you, sir?”

* * *

Troi’s distress was no longer obvious. It had been carefully cloaked by her professionalism once again, and only those who knew her very well could tell that her hands were held a little too tightly against her lap as she sat in her lounge in the command area and told them her story of dreams. And there was only one person here who knew her that well.

Will Riker watched her, forcing himself not to interrupt, not to say anything after he too had finished describing the incident in the corridor, no matter how silly it sounded. He simply stood by, as the others focused on Troi. It hadn’t been easy for her, telling the captain that she had a dream that wouldn’t go away, and for Riker describing that person—or whatever he was—in the corridor had been just as strenuous. Only Captain Picard’s studious attention to their silly stories told them that he’d seen enough in the galaxy not to dismiss such things as silly.

The captain stood over Troi now, absorbing the whole idea of her dream with what Riker had told him about. Earth ships, humans in uniform—somewhere there was a common denominator. He meant to find it.

“Can you describe your perceptions more specifically, Counselor?”

Troi tipped her pretty head. “I’ll try to verbalize them, Captain, but I must advise you these are imprecise explanations. Telepathic impressions are sometimes too vague for interpretation.”

“Do your best.”

She nodded once. “My mind describes to me several different historical periods, not necessarily all of Earth, though the clearest ones seem to be human or humanoid. Perhaps that’s simply because of my partly human heritage—I can’t say. Some, though . . . some are so

alien that I don't know any words to describe what I've seen."

"Alien, you say?"

"Yes, very obviously so. But the ship I envisioned was definitely of Earth."

"Believe me, we'll get to that in a moment. Go on."

She paused, but not for long. Picard wasn't a man she cared to keep waiting. "There's a haze of apprehension . . . urgency . . . resistance. But no violent intent."

"You can't be sure of that!" Tasha interrupted from the afterdeck with her usual serenity. She caught Riker's eyes, and his disapproval, but she plugged on. "I mean . . . if they're alien sensations, then Deanna could be misinterpreting them completely. To their home beings, those impressions might be hostile, aggressive, and dangerous."

"You're too suspicious, Tasha," Riker said defensively.

"I'm doing my job," she retaliated. Not so much as a glimmer of regret marred her conviction. She knew perfectly well she was volatile—it was an advantage. Unlike Worf, who constantly worked to control his Klingon explosiveness, Tasha would stand up for the worth of her own. Riker saw that in her eyes as he looked back at her now, in the underlying ferocity beneath her face, and indeed it caused him to back down. Not until he'd been silent for several seconds did he realize how completely she had gotten her point across.

Troi picked up on the tension immediately, though she needn't have been telepathic for that. It chewed at her; her job was to keep watch over the emotions and mental states of the starship complement, to guide them through tensions and head off the truly harmful contretemps that came and went in this kind of extended separation. How awful to be the cause of this . . . how terrible.

She tipped one hand up as it leaned against her thigh and said, "No . . . Tasha's right. Because though there's no perception of aggressive intent," she said, pausing then to say the one thing that truly frightened her, "doesn't change the fact that I'm receiving glimpses of violent destruction."

Not giving those ominous statements any chance to take hold on the imaginations of the bridge crew, Picard lowered into his command chair beside her, hoping to put her and everyone at ease. He was

aware of the effect these little disturbances were having on the crew, especially when they saw Deanna Troi's usual poise inexplicably shattered. "Can you focus on that? Are we in danger?"

"That's what confuses me, sir," she said steadily. "While I see images of destruction, there seems to be no intent behind it, even though it's definitely the product of a mind and not natural phenomena. As I said, no violent intent."

"That's reassuring, at least."

"But, sir, you don't understand." She stopped him from rising with a light touch on his forearm. "I shouldn't be getting concrete images at all. It's simply not among my abilities to receive visions and forms. As such," she added reluctantly, "I'm not certain you should trust my judgment."

A soothing smile appeared on Picard's princely features. "I trust your interpretation, Deanna."

"But she's a telepath," Dr. Crusher pointed out. Until now the doctor had been a silent observer, fascinated both personally and professionally by Deanna Troi's story of unwelcome impressions and unfocused dreams, and as her voice cut through the distinct tension, it added a touch of common sense they needed right now. "She's not a psychic. There's an important distinction, you realize."

"Yes, that's true," Troi said, looking at her gratefully. "That's what I mean. The difference between what I can do and what I'm somehow being forced to do."

Piecing it all together and still getting a choppy mosaic at best, Picard nodded. "Tell me what you're feeling," he said, "in one word."

She didn't answer immediately. Several long and anxious minutes went by as she selected and discarded a number of possibilities. Those around her watched as each crossed her face, each perplexing her with its inadequacy.

Then she found it. Or the one that came closest. For the first time in all those minutes of searching, Troi fixed her gaze on Jean-Luc Picard and worked her lips around a word.

"Misery."

When she spoke, the misery shone in her eyes. She was caught in

empathy for that instant, empathy for the beings whose impressions she was being given, or being forced to receive. It was as though she were asking, imploring, for help. After a pause she drew a breath and sighed, her lovely brows drawn tight as she realized the full impact of that word was somewhat lost on them. After all, they weren't feeling it.

Picard saw the change in her face. "Misery can be many things, Counselor," he said to her.

She nodded. "Yes," she agreed. "Clinically I would call it a kind of dysphoria. But I'd be inaccurate to say there was no physical suffering. Yet I don't perceive a sense of body. It's quite confusing, sir. I'm sorry."

"Permission to stop saying that, Counselor," Picard offered. He placed his hands on his knees and stood up. "Now, let's see about these ships." He led the whole crowd up to the extra-large monitors at the aft science station, where Worf was moving aside to let everyone curve around his post. The captain spoke up immediately. "Computer, show me various military vessels from—when did you say?"

Troi stepped forward, somehow managing to stay close to Riker, to gather strength from his presence. "The most familiar one was late nineteen-eighties, Captain. An Aegis cruiser, according to records."

"Computer, engage as specified."

On the screen, almost instantly, a 2-D image of the Aegis appeared.

Picard asked, "Is this the right ship?"

"Oh, no, sir. Simply the right . . . idea. The right age."

"Computer, expound upon this index."

The Aegis was replaced by a different vessel, then another, and another, while the balmy female voice ticked off descriptions.

"Destroyer, United States Navy . . . PT boat, United States Navy . . . computer support vessel, Royal Canadian Maritime Command . . . light amphibious transport, United States Navy . . . nuclear submarine, Navy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics . . . Invincible-class V/STOL carrier, Royal Navy of Great Britain . . . CV-type conventional-power aircraft carrier, United States—"

“Stop!”

Troi drew back from her own outburst, but continued to point at the screen. “This is very close.”

“Close, but . . . ” Picard prodded.

“But . . . I don’t know. I know very little about surface vessels.”

“Computer, specify this vessel.”

“U.S.S. Forrestal, CV-59, commissioned October 1955, United States Navy.”

“Very well, continue.”

Another ship popped on the screen, looking much the same to the untrained eyes watching it now. “*CVN-type nuclear-powered full-deck aircraft carrier—”*

“Yes!” Troi jolted. “Yes, this!” She pressed a hand tightly over her mouth, profoundly moved by what she saw.

Picard remained subdued, capping her reaction with his own implacability. “Computer, specify.”

“*U.S.S.* George Washington, CVN-73, *Enterprise-class aircraft carrier; commissioned January 1992, United States Navy*.”

Troi pulled her hand from her mouth. “This is extremely familiar to me.”

A tangible discomfort blanketed the bridge. All eyes flickered, then settled on her. Of course, she felt it without looking. Self-consciously she corrected, “Rather, to the impressions I’ve been channeling.”

“Yes,” Picard murmured, glancing at Riker over Troi’s dark head, “of course. You said something about names.”

Troi stared at the aircraft carrier as if she feared it might disappear like all the other images. “Vasska was one. Arkady . . . and Gor . . . Gorsha—no, it’s not right, not complete.”

“Data, you up here, please.”

Caught by surprise, Data all but hurtled to them from the lower deck, taking the seat at the science station as though he’d been deeply stung

by their not asking for his help earlier. Riker moved aside a bit farther than necessary, giving in to a twinge of prejudice, but he forced himself to let it pass. Data *was* the qualified one. An instrument running an instrument.

Evidently Data was ready to guide the search through *Enterprise*'s vast memory core, focusing on the specific type of aircraft carrier and the names Troi had spoken; he didn't request that she repeat them. His fingers nearly tangled in his haste to participate and be useful amid all this talk of feelings and senses and memories.

If there was disappointment, he didn't allow it to show on his face.

"Sir," he began, "I regret this may take some time. I'll have to operate by a process of elimination. May I suggest you allow me to notify you once I pull it off."

If that was his polite way of asking them not to hang over his shoulder the whole time, it worked.

"Very well." Picard motioned the little crowd away and leaned toward Riker. "What was it he said?"

"Sir—" Tasha raised her hand in a brief gesture, and quickly drew it down when Picard turned. "I'm Lithuanian."

Picard swallowed an impulse to congratulate her and merely asked, "And?"

"And I recognize those names. They're Russian."

"Ah! Very good, Lieutenant. Mr. Data, make use of that."

"You bet," Data clipped, and didn't see Picard's double-take as he turned to his station.

"Captain . . . " Troi turned abruptly. "If I may, I'd like to return to my quarters. Perhaps I can clear my mind. Focus in on these impressions, or let them focus in on me."

Picard noticed that Data was still watching him, as though the decisions hinged upon one another—computer search and mind hunt. "That's sound strategy," he told her, "since we don't seem to be able to zero in on it any quicker with our hardware. I want you to be careful, however. And nothing is too small to report."

“Yes, sir,” she murmured, and as she pivoted toward the turbolift she caught Riker’s concerned gaze. “I promise.”

The bridge was wide, the walk to the turbolift uncomfortably long as Troi deliberately kept herself from showing anxiety. Riker’s own legs tensed; he empathized with her every stride, wished he were going with her, that he could somehow help. Seemed like lately all he and Deanna could be to each other was a mutual distraction . . .

“She’s a very competent broad,” Data offered.

So innocuous. So deadpan . . .

Riker stopped breathing. Picard glowered. LaForge and Worf both stiffened in place, Tasha flushed, Bev Crusher looked away.

Troi was barely reaching the turbolift. Had she heard?

Data sat in a pool of perpetual good intentions, his chair swiveled ever so slightly toward the rest of them, and as all eyes crawled to him with that collective reprimand his expression became confused. He glanced from each to the others. “Chick? Dish?”

The turbolift doors brushed open. A preoccupied ship’s counselor stepped in.

“Bird? Bun? Babe? Skirt? Fox?”

“Data!” chorused Picard, Riker, and Yar, just as the lift doors closed.

The android flinched, and closed his mouth in an almost pouting manner. His gold-leaf face took on a sudden innocence; he looked vulnerable. Under their scolding eyes, he retreated once again to his memory search through the starship’s deep mainframe, and Picard noticed a definite shift of Data’s shoulders when attention fell away from him.

“Stations, everyone,” Picard said casually, setting the mood for the bridge to relax until there was a reason not to. The tension didn’t entirely dissolve, but each officer made a laudable effort not to contribute to its increase.

From one side Picard accepted a graceful nod from his ship’s chief surgeon. He recognized the decidedly medical gesture—Crusher wasn’t going to offer an opinion—not yet. Not until all the cards were on the table. Not about Troi’s agitated condition, not about these

unclinical occurrences, not about anything.

“I’ll be in sickbay, Captain,” she said roundly, “whenever you need me.”

Picard nodded an acknowledgment, warmed beyond logic by her words, and the past once again moved between them, the mutuality of sadness and vision that had made them acquaintances long ago yet had also stood in the way of their ever becoming close. He watched with a twinge of regret as Crusher pivoted and left the bridge.

Burying his feelings, Picard approached Riker from so practiced an angle that Riker didn’t notice him until he spoke. “Mr. Riker.”

“Oh—Captain . . . aye, sir? What can I do for you?”

“Better ask what you can do for yourself. Tell me again what you saw in the corridor.”

Riker shifted uneasily, unhappy with the idea that he’d been “seeing things.” He still held a heavy rock in his stomach, his brows still tightened over his eyes no matter how he tried to relax his face. “I wish I knew. It looked as solid to me as you do now—*he* did, rather. When it faded, I assumed it was overbleed from Troi’s holographs. But it wasn’t. And I wasn’t imagining it.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

“Because it didn’t do what I would’ve expected it to do. I think my imagination would make something act as I might expect it to, but this . . . man . . . reached out to me with the strangest expression. It’s difficult, sir. I’d like to be more concrete—”

“Captain,” Data abruptly called from above, whirling in his chair. “I have it, sir.”

“Hi, Mom.”

Wesley Crusher raised his head as his mother strode into their quarters off the main sickbay. His face had the typical porcelain smoothness of sixteen-year-old skin, his hair combed a little too neatly, his clothing pin-straight on his skinny frame. He’d taken to looking more like that since the captain made him acting ensign. It seemed to Beverly Crusher that Wesley was keeping himself perfectly

groomed just so he wouldn't look out of place among the uniformed personnel on the bridge, and like any sixteen-year-old he carried it to extremes.

"Wes," she began, not in greeting. "I need you to do something for me."

He gladly turned away from his study tapes. "Sure, Mom. What?"

"Are you scheduled to go onto the bridge today?"

"Me? Well, not exactly. Mr. Data asked me to help him catalog some physics theories sometime this week, and I was going to use that as an excuse to go up there later—"

"Can you do that now?"

Wesley got to his feet, which made him suddenly as tall as his tall mother. "Really? I mean, how come?"

"Baby-sit the bridge for me."

Wesley's smooth face fractured. "Huh?"

"I want you to keep an eye on things for me. There's something going on, and nobody's sure what. It's affecting Deanna Troi, and if I can't have her expertise to call upon, then I want to at least keep a jump on conditions."

Wesley grimaced. "Mom," he began, "I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

Dr. Crusher grinned sadly at him. "Call it medical intuition. Call it anything you want, but just be my spy on the bridge. I can't go up there myself because I've got a lineup of pediatric checkups this afternoon, and besides, I'd be too obvious. Will you do it?"

He shrugged, sure there was a catch somewhere. "Of course I'll do it."

She patted the side of his face as she was given to do once in a while just to remind herself that this bright, lively, *tall* fellow was still the seven-and-a-half-pound infant who hardly ever slept a night through until he was twelve years old. "Thanks, buster. I'll never forget this."

She started toward the lab entrance, but turned when Wesley asked, "Mom, just what is it I'm supposed to be watching for?"

Beverly Crusher didn't slacken her pace as she turned once again in midstride. "Use your imagination."

Riker entered Troi's quarters hesitantly. He knew he was interrupting much sooner than she expected. And there she was—so much like before, so much.

"Back again, Bill," she murmured, and she smiled at him. The dim quarters lit up just a little.

It took him by surprise, as it always did, that "Bill." Very few people called him that, and on this ship, only Troi. Only Deanna. "I'm sorry about this," he said, approaching her, but this time not sitting down. "Believe it or not, Data's already found the file. I didn't want to bug you so soon, but—"

"Don't apologize," she said. "It doesn't really suit you."

His brows went up. "Doesn't it? That's bad."

Troi shrugged. "Depends on the source."

"The source doesn't have the luxury of not knowing how to apologize," he said. "Maybe someday."

"Maybe someday *Captain* Riker. Don't you think?"

"You're digging, Deanna," he accused with a grin. "I'm just so many loose-leaf pages to you, and don't think I don't know it. I'm not ready for captaincy, but I admit—"

"That first officer is an awkward position," she completed fluidly.

Riker laughed and dropped into the nearest chair. "Quit doing that, will you?" At first he lounged back in the chair and casually waved his hand, but time was pressing, and he leaned forward again almost immediately. "I hate to rush you."

"It's all right. I'm anxious for the answer as much as for the peace. Solitude is not that welcome a companion."

Riker paused then, wondering if she could sense his empathy for her, and the inadequacy of his understanding. Ultimately, as he found himself unable to draw away from her steady unshielded gaze, he simply asked, "Why do you stay? What can it do for you to stay

among humans? We must drive you crazy."

Troi laughed. "Oh, Bill . . . you're such a decisive fellow. Don't you know why I stay?"

"I'm on audio, Counselor. Tell me."

Her smile changed, became more wistful, and she looked down. When she looked up again, her coal eyes sparkled. "I like humans."

Riker grinned. "Do you really?"

"Yes, quite a lot. Better than I like Betazoids. But don't tell anyone." She pursed her lips conspiratorially. "Yes, I like them. Even though I make them uncomfortable, I like them very much. They're so honest, so well-meaning, they have such deep integrity as a species . . . and my human half has given me something few Betazoids possess."

"What's that?"

She squared her shoulders against the back of the chair and said, "Discipline. Self-discipline, I mean. And . . . I believe I possess an intuition Betazoids never had to develop. My mother and her people take everything at face value, and they often think it's a joke to invade the minds of others. I've learned that in the universe nothing can be taken at face value, and I learned that from humans. Do you know that as an alien hybrid, I can actually read a wider range of emotions than full Betazoids? Even though the impressions aren't clear, I can do that. I have many advantages thanks to my human side, and I'm proud of it."

Riker was appreciably silent, surprised by her generosity. He knew how often she must feel alone. He saw the glances that were cast at her as she came into a room or left one. For a long time he'd wondered if his affection for her was indeed affection or just a man's protectiveness toward what he perceives as a woman's weakness. Troi bore an excess of handicaps in her position as ship's counselor, a position that was new to Starfleet, new to the Federation, and still undefined. No one really knew, or at least understood, what her purpose was on the ship. But they all knew she was here to watch them, to evaluate the overall psychological condition of the ship's complement and report to the captain as necessary. A mental guardian —or watchdog, depending on perception. Someday the Federation would be able to define the post of ship's counselor, or people would just get used to the idea, but for now Deanna Troi and the few like her would have to brook the vagueness.

“You impress me,” he said spontaneously.

She laughed again. “Don’t be too impressed. I cry myself to sleep more often than I’d like to admit.”

Her faint Greek accent tapped the words out with the clip of a sparrow’s talons hopping across marble. Riker bit his tongue and kept his inadequate reassurances to himself. She didn’t need them—at least none he could voice.

“Thank you,” she whispered, and he knew he’d failed to keep his feelings to himself. “I’m needed, Bill. I can make a contribution that even full Betazoids could never make. For that privilege, I’ll happily pay the price. I’m not sure, though, that this is the place to make that contribution.”

Riker clasped his hands and leaned his elbows on his knees, gazed down for a moment, then looked up. “Do you know how guilty you’re making me feel?”

Troi flickered her eyes at him, paused, then tossed her head. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

Caught off guard, Riker blushed and couldn’t keep control of his smile, but she was still smiling too. Damn, she was good at that.

“To the bridge, Number One?” she suggested gently.

He stood up and reached for her hand. “To the bridge, Counselor.”

“Go ahead, Mr. Data.”

Picard spoke evenly as he stood on Troi’s right, Riker on her left, as though their presence at her sides would help protect her from what was to come. She still looked controlled enough, considering she’d gotten no chance whatsoever even to put her head back for a moment and absorb these events. Data punched up the records he’d discovered.

“Sir, I must apologize,” Data said. “The search was not as exhaustive as I first estimated. Counselor Troi’s perceptions were accurate and all the information came together—”

“Let’s hear it, then, Data. Don’t dawdle.”

“Yes, sir. As you can see on the monitor, this is a full-deck nuclear

aircraft carrier from the nineteen-nineties. It was a Soviet Union vessel out on a demonstration run in the Black Sea when it mysteriously disappeared on April twenty-fourth, 1995."

"Disappeared?" Picard rumbled. "Do you have any idea the size of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, Commander?"

Though Picard meant the question to be rhetorical, Data had an immediate answer. "Oh, yes, sir. Up to ninety thousand tons with a personnel complement five times that of our starship."

The captain suddenly felt silly for having asked. "All right, go on. What was this ship called?"

Even Data was aware of Deanna Troi as he quietly responded, "The *Gorshkov*."

Troi's eyes drifted closed. She steadied herself within the sounds of that word, then opened her eyes again and kept tight rein on the battery of emotions—even the grief.

"Go on, Data," Picard urged.

"Her captain was Arkady Reykov. He had a long, rocky political history before leaving that arena for the naval command. His disapproval of the Soviet system had caused him some discomfort, but his skill as a naval officer evidently overshadowed that. Such experience was at a premium in the U.S.S.R. in those days, so he was allowed to continue."

Riker listened to the simplified description of a twisted international skein, all the tugs and pulls of that volatile period, and couldn't help wondering what Reykov would have felt if he'd known the future. If he'd known he was a cog in the mechanism that led to Earth's 21st-century cataclysms.

"And this Vasska?" Picard prodded.

The response, spoken as tenuously as spider's threads snapping between two leaves, came not from Data, but from Troi.

"Timofei . . . "

They turned to her.

Troi poised herself and completed, "Timofei Vasska. I believe he was

first officer."

Uneasily Picard turned to Data for confirmation.

"Yes, that is correct," Data said, just as uneasily.

"Do we have photographs of them?" Riker asked.

Data glanced at him. "Possibly . . . let me run a search. Computer, show any available visuals of Reykov or Vasska."

The computer settled into a long hum, but they didn't have to wait long until its soft feminine voice said, "*Only available visual on specified subjects is a news photograph shortly before launch of the* Gorshkov. *On screen.*"

The screen did its best to focus a grainy photograph of some hundred or more uniformed men, apparently officers of the carrier, all standing together on the big flat deck. The figures were small and crowded together, but on the left two officers stood slightly apart and in front of the others, their faces blurred by the poor quality of the photo.

"There," Riker said, pointing. "Computer, augment the two men in the foreground."

Abruptly two faces appeared, somewhat blurred, yet their strong features and proud expressions quite clear on the screen.

"That's him," Riker murmured, pointing again, this time at the big man on the right. "That's the man I saw in the corridor."

Picard looked deeply into the Soviet officer's strong eyes and murmured, "Reykov . . . "

As he said the name, he realized his reaction was instinct. No one had told him that this was the captain of the *Gorshkov*, yet somehow he knew. Somehow there was a symbiosis, something in the face that he, as a captain, understood.

He turned to Deanna Troi. "Counselor?"

She steadied herself, gazing into the faces on the screen. "Yes," she said quietly. "Reykov and Vasska."

"Data," the captain said, "do you have anything more on these two?"

The android nodded and said, "A little, sir. Timofei Vasska was thirty-

five, a longtime exec of Reykov's. Records are incomplete, but a few articles on the incident speculated that the two men were friends and may have plotted together to defect with some new technology."

"What technology?" Riker blurted, not caring if he was out of order. He felt the tightness of Troi's exquisite body beside him and might have done anything at that moment to ease her fear. He felt it so strongly that he might as well have been the telepath.

Data was about to answer when the lift door parted and Wesley Crusher strode onto the bridge, his long legs going like wheel spokes, and he grated to a stop as all eyes struck him. The placid expression dropped away under a slap of surprise—why were they all bundled together around the science station?

He hovered in place for a moment, then waved clumsily and smiled. "Hi, everybody . . . "

The captain straightened. "What are you doing up here at this hour, Mr. Crusher?"

Wesley's mouth dried up. Funny, but it all sounded so easy when his mother talked about this. "I . . . I, uh . . . "

"Well, never mind just now. Get to it and don't interrupt us again."

Self-consciousness roaring through him, Wesley went to the other science monitor and tried to fake work, though he couldn't keep from glancing at what the others were doing.

"On with you, Commander," Picard said sharply.

Data glanced at him and picked up where he'd left off. "*Gorshkov* was carrying a special device, an electromagnetic pulsor which could deflect incoming rocketry and aircraft. The science was new at the time, but the Soviets had pushed through the preliminary testing and gone straight to a fully mounted pulsor on a vessel."

"Fine," Picard barked, "but what *happened* to them?"

"Oh . . . yes. Apparently the ship was . . . pulverized. Unexplainably and utterly."

"My God," the captain breathed.

"There was very little left of the ship," Data said, pausing then, "and

absolutely nothing of the crew."

Riker nudged forward. "Nothing? Not a single body anywhere?"

"That's correct. Relations between major powers had been steadily improving since the early nineteen-eighties, but when analysis of the flotsam indicated a cataclysm from outside the ship rather than some problem with the ship's reactors, for instance, the world nearly buckled with mutual accusations."

"I shouldn't wonder," Picard murmured.

"But there was no proof that any nation had blitzed the ship. Add to that the appearance of seven Soviet naval aircraft from the *Gorshkov* which requested landing clearance on a United States carrier a short time later—pardon me, sir, I did not mean to be unspecific. The U.S. ship was the *Roosevelt*, and was hanging out in a nearby sea when the Soviet planes arrived in their airspace some sixty-nine minutes after witnessing the demolition of their own ship. Those pilots swore no missile had come in to cream the *Gorshkov*. Historians had theorized that if it hadn't been for those pilots' testimony so soon after the incident, international relations might have dissolved and World War Three started on the spot. Adding, of course, the blessing that the pilots were Russians themselves and could appeal to the outraged Soviet government without the baggage of racial distrust. Had the witnesses been American or British, we might not be here today. As it was, the issue was a canker between major powers for decades and a real pain for diplomacy."

Picard frowned and murmured, "Mmm . . . thank you, Data." He took Riker by the arm and pulled him to one side, then leaned toward him. "Why's he talking like that?"

Riker blinked, but that blink cleared his eyes not on Picard, not on Data, but on Deanna Troi, who was in turn holding her breath and staring at the helm—at Lieutenant LaForge. Her face was frozen in astonishment as sensation flowed from LaForge to her.

Instinct rippling, Riker shot his glare to the helm.

LaForge was rising from his chair, slowly, like a sleepwalker, his hands pressed flat on his control board. He rose so slowly, in fact, that he was drawing attention to himself.

By the time Riker stepped away from the captain and came to the ramp, everyone else had noticed and was tensely watching, unable to

look away. LaForge's mouth hung open and he bent like a man punched in the ribs. His hands remained flat on his console, his legs stiff and slightly bent. Of course the visor hid his eyes, but from the set of his body, his face and lips, Riker could imagine what a seeing man's eyes would show. Shock.

Wesley stepped toward the ramp, his reedy young body all knots. "Geordi?"

Riker snapped his fingers and pointed. "Wesley, stay where you are."

But Wesley's movement had nudged Riker into taking over that movement toward the helm.

LaForge breathed in short gasps. He didn't respond, but stared—or seemed to stare—forward and slightly starboard of his position. He turned his head further in that direction, then twisted partially around to look across the entire starboard side of the bridge.

Riker came around in front of the helm. "Geordi?"

"Sir . . . " LaForge continued turning, resembling more than anything a music-box doll on a spindle.

Before him, all around the starboard curve of the bridge, human forms were milling. Far different from the warm mannequins of the regular crew, these forms were flat, glowing, staticky yellow, striated with jagged impulse lines—but unmistakably human. Not humanoid—*human*. There was something in the way they moved, the way they turned and walked and gestured, that made him certain of it.

"Sir . . . somebody's here . . . "

Riker moved a step closer, his shoulders drawing slightly inward as a shiver assaulted his spine. "But there's no one there."

"They *are* here, sir!"

Riker held out one hand in a calming gesture that didn't work. "All right . . . tell me what wavelengths you're tuned in to right now. Help me, Geordi. I want to see them too."

Geordi moved choppily backward, bumping Riker, bumping his own chair, trying to avoid the unseen entities as he moved toward the science station on the upper bridge, but he never even got close. He bumped the bridge rail with one shoulder and couldn't move

anymore, but stayed there trying to convince himself he wasn't going out of his mind.

"Geordi, just describe it," Riker said, glancing at Picard for reassurance. "What are you seeing?"

LaForge trembled. "I don't know . . . "

"Lieutenant," Picard snapped from above him, "give me a report. Analyze what you're seeing and report on it."

"Uh . . . they're . . . narrow-band . . . low-resolution pixels at several wavelengths . . . toward the blue in the invisible spectrum . . . but some acoustical waves are giving me a visual of animated pulses—"

Picard's voice was laced with impatience, but also with awe. "Are you telling me you can see what they *sound* like?"

"Yes, sir—more or less. God, they're everywhere!"

"Data," Picard urged.

"I have it, sir. One moment," Data said as he worked furiously on the computer sensory adjustment, then struck a final pressure point and looked up at the viewscreen.

The visual of the bridge was chilling. Each saw himself, in place, as each was now. All appeared normal, all things right. Their bridge monitors were flicking the usual status displays, the beige carpeting, the bands of color on Wesley's gray shirt, and the officers' red and black, gold and black, or azure and black uniforms showing that the colors were right and the picture crisp—not very reassuring at the moment.

On the starboard bridge, specters walked. Over a dozen humanoid shapes glowed yellowish white, flat as X-ray diffraction images. Form, movement, shape, without definition, without depth, glassy human shapes moving behind a curtain of spectral impulses, outlined by a sizzling blue thread. Some were moving catatonically, milling back and forth on the ramp and in front of the big viewscreen and in the command arena. Some stood still, as though looking back at Riker as he dared approach the monitor, absorbing what he saw. He was looking into a mirror and there were images staring back at him that were beside him in the room.

He spun, scanning a starboard bridge that looked empty. His throat

tightened and held back his one effort to speak. All he could do was watch as Captain Picard turned away from the monitor and also scanned what could not be seen by the naked human eye. Unlike everyone else, who had sidled away from that side of the bridge, Picard now moved toward it, his face a granite challenge.

“Open all frequencies. Tie in translator.” He waited only an instant for the *click-beep* that told him Tasha had shaken from her chill and complied. He raised his voice. “This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the United Federation of Planets. You are invading my ship without invitation. What is your purpose here?”

There was nothing. Riker kept his eyes on the shapes in the monitor, no matter that the hairs rose on the back of his neck because he knew they were right behind him.

“We request that you communicate with us,” Picard said forcefully. “State your intentions immediately.”

Riker watched the monitor, unable to look at the vacant deck, and his skin crawled. Two of the X-ray images began to move toward Picard, one from the side, one from behind.

Riker bolted. “Captain!”

He got the captain’s arm between both hands and pulled him aside, the urgent dance putting Riker between the captain and the approaching specters. Within a second, Worf dropped onto the command deck beside him, and above them Yar had drawn her phaser. In a purely human manner, Riker swiveled his head around, looking for what couldn’t be seen, and his stomach contracted as he waited for blows from invisible hands.

Then—

“They’re gone . . . ”

LaForge spoke up clearly enough to make everyone *really* nervous.

Riker didn’t believe it. Gut feeling told him otherwise.

But the captain trusted the wavelength-sensitive monitor that now showed only himself and his own crew occupying the bridge. Yet even he couldn’t avoid a surreptitious glance about the deck.

“All right, Mr. Riker,” he murmured then, “at ease.”

But no one was at ease. No one at all.

Wesley Crusher tightened his young eyes and whispered, “The ship is haunted . . . ”

Chapter Four

"HAUNTED," CAPTAIN PICARD snorted. "Superstitious claptrap. Belay that attitude, ensign."

He moved to the command center, not quite ready to sit down, plagued by the sensation that those entities were still walking around him. He cast an intolerant glance at Wesley Crusher, communicating that all they needed now was the wisdom of a teenager to gum up the works. As he caught Wesley's whipped-puppy expression, Picard felt once again the sting of his decision to make Wesley an ensign, a decision no good parent would make, yet one that he, as a man who had never had children, had made without realizing the consequences. He should have known better, for as commanding officer he was indeed the father of all his crew and complement. Wesley's face was the face of a child; no seasoned officer would take the reprimand so personally. And having given it, Picard could not take it back.

There were many things which could not be taken back. Such an error and a disservice, promoting the boy to the bridge so early, without the earning. *Not so much a disservice to the bridge, but to the boy*.

Picard watched the viewscreen, turning away from the young face that occupied his mind now.

Yes, promoting Wesley to the bridge had aroused the resentment of Starfleet officers who might not be as brilliant but might be more deserving. Wesley Crusher had become the supreme knick-knack—a pretty display of talent, but not really functional. Anything he did on the bridge had to be monitored, no matter that he could calculate things inside his head sometimes before the computer made its reports. That was just how it was.

And why did I do that to him? Picard wondered, letting the familiar thought roll through his mind all in that one glance. *Do I feel so responsible for his father's death? Do I owe Jack Crusher so much for the mistake that killed him . . . that I would make another mistake with his son? Am I so anxious to gain the gratitude of this boy's mother that I*

would use his brilliance to showcase my good will? And now I risk destroying his distorted image of himself if I withdraw his status as acting ensign and put him back where he belongs . . . Ah, Picard, tu t'es fait avoir.

He sighed, and turned to his command crew. "All right. Ensign Crusher says ghosts. It's as good a starting point as any."

Worf's Klingon brow puckered. "But, sir, ghosts are fables!"

"Perhaps so, from a metaphysical perspective," Picard said evenly and without a pause. "But we're not going to address that. We're going to approach them from a wholly scientific vantage. Disband all thoughts of wraiths and think in terms of alternate life-forms and mind forms. Mr. Data, what can you give me on that?"

Caught off guard by having so folklorish a subject cast at him, Data blinked and appeared suddenly helpless.

Riker stepped in, knowing better, but still not fast enough to stop himself. "An android wouldn't know anything about life, sir, much less the occult."

The captain's eyes struck him like blades. "I'm talking about spectral apparitions, Riker, and you are out of line with that remark. Aren't you?"

Bruised, Riker nodded smartly. "Yes, sir, I guess I am."

"I asked Data a question."

Data may or may not have appreciated the dressing-down on his behalf, but the fact was he found himself floundering on such a subject. To a being for whom knowledge had always meant plain facts, this mystical concept was quicksand. Very conscious of the attention he was getting, Data glanced at Riker, straightened a little, and spoke.

"Sir," he began, "I would postulate that, since the life-forms were picked up by Geordi's visor and then by the recalibrated bridge sensors, they are not foibles of Earth thaumaturgy, but indeed of a substantive hylozoic constituence."

Picard's mouth crumpled. "What?"

"They're real."

“Oh. You might’ve said so.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“What you mean,” Picard continued, “is that something incorporeal need not be unalive. Traditionally, ghosts are unalive. These beings aren’t.”

Data cocked his head. “Difficult to say, sir. That transgresses into the realm of semantics. We would have to isolate what it means . . . to be alive.”

The android’s sudden discomfort with those words drew Picard’s attention once again to his eyes, to the boyish innocence of a being who had gone all the way through Starfleet Academy, spent a dozen years on Starfleet vessels, yet somehow remained the quintessence of ignorance. Data would have to have that word applied to him . . . but no book learning, regardless of its extent, could replace the priceless pleasures and brutalities of living interaction.

“Do we have an analysis from the science labs yet?” the captain asked.

Data played with the computer board nearest him and accessed the information as it was fed back to him through the computer’s sophisticated comparative-analysis system, then said, “They seem to be some sort of phased energy, sir.”

“What does that mean?”

“Apparently they exist here in pulses. Here and not here. They don’t always exist in one place. It’s not energy as we commonly define it. It is more like a proto-energy. It has some of the properties of energy and matter, yet sometimes none of those. It seems unfamiliar to our science.” Data looked up. “Apparently stability is not their forte.”

“That’s an interesting nonanalysis, Mr. Data. Seems to me the computer is turning backflips to avoid admitting that it doesn’t know.”

“At the moment, I cannot blame it, sir.”

Picard gave him an acid glare, but was pleasantly distracted when Troi came to him, deliberately holding her hands clasped before her, evidence of her effort to keep control. “Sir . . . ”

“Go on, Counselor, nothing’s too outlandish at this point.”

“If they are . . . ghosts—that is, the remaining mental matter of deceased physical forms,” she said, “can they be destroyed?”

“Destroyed.” Picard tasted the word. “You mean killed, don’t you? To be able to be killed is one of the signs of life.”

Moved by his blunt response to the problem, Troi forced herself to push the point. “And if they can be killed, does that mean they’re alive?”

“No one has talked about punitive action yet, Counselor,” the captain said. “But these images of destruction you’re receiving,” he added. “I can’t dismiss those.”

From her expression they could see she wasn’t trying to split hairs; the question was very urgent to her, a true matter of life and death. “Yes, sir, I know. But I’m desperate that my perceptions not be misread. I don’t trust myself to analyze them yet. I wouldn’t want you to take punitive action before it’s warranted, just because of me.”

“Are you saying you *do* sense a danger to us?”

Frustrated, she tilted her head and sighed. “I’m trying not to say it, but I’m also afraid not to. If you understand me . . . ”

“Oh, I think I understand. These entities exist on a plane so different from our own that their very existence may endanger us. We’ve run into that sort of thing before in Federation expansion.”

“Yes, sir, that’s what I mean,” Troi said anxiously. “Even if they pose a danger to us, do they deserve to be killed when all they’ve done is trespass onto the ship?”

“Mmmm,” Picard murmured. “And will they be as generous when discussing us, I wonder.” He paced around her, contemplating the carpet. “I’ll keep all that in mind. Whatever the case, I will not allow my crew to succumb to superstition. We will find the answers, and they will be scientifically based.”

Troi straightened her spine. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, sir,” Data said, turning to his console.

“I agree, sir,” Riker said. “Whoever these beings are, we have to assume they’re sentient, and that they have intentions that we’ll have to figure out before we can act.”

“Yes,” Picard murmured. “And the question remains,” he added softly, scanning the bridge, now as eerie and silent as a graveyard at dawn, “what are they doing *here?”*

The words put a pool of ice water around all their feet. The captain didn’t wait for it to warm.

“Mr. Riker, my ready room. I’ll have a word with you.”

Riker forced himself to follow the captain’s retreating form into the private room off the bridge. No sooner had the door brushed shut behind him than the captain froze him in place with a lofty glare.

“You undermined my authority, Mr. Riker.”

Trying to replay the past moments in his mind without the jitters that still ran the deck on the other side of that door, Riker asked, “Did I, sir?”

The captain stood with his compact frame backdropped by the viewport’s starscape, appearing quite the nobleman among the peerage. “You did.”

Inclining his head, Riker offered, “But I saw those forms closing in on you. I didn’t know what they intended.”

“You needn’t have done your Olympic pole vault on my account,” the captain said. “A simple word of warning would have been sufficient.”

Squaring his shoulders—but not too much—Riker proclaimed, “It’s my job to protect you, sir.”

“Yes, I know that’s the official story,” Picard said. “When you’ve come back alive as many times as I have, you’ll earn the right to have someone look after you as well. I’ll thank you to allow me the dignity of taking my own punches from now on. Dismissed.”

“Geordi, look at this. Geordi, look at that. Geordi, tell us what this is made of. Geordi, look through walls like Superman. Sure, no problem, I’ll look. All I am is what I look through.”

“Take it easy,” Beverly Crusher murmured as she adjusted the tiny filter on the miniaturized low-power sensory compensator in LaForge’s visor. “You know, you should have a medical engineer doing this.”

“No thanks,” the young man grumbled, blinking his flat gray unseeing eyes at her, trying to imagine what she really looked like—*really*.

“And you should have rested after what happened on the bridge,” she told him evenly. “You can’t ask your body to power this sensor system to that level without letting yourself rest. That’s why it hurts you so much, Geordi. You’re unremitting.”

He nodded his cocoa-dark head in her general direction and said, “I don’t mind the hurt. I can’t just leave my post. But somehow I expected a little more appreciation from people who were stationed on *Enterprise*. I just assumed anybody who could get assigned to this ship would be a little more up to date than the run-of-the-mill ship’s crew.” He closed his eyes tight against the pounding headache and rubbed his hand across them, waiting for the medication to work. “Riker just expected me to *tell him*. It’s not that easy. I can’t just glance at things like you can. I can’t just pop out with words for the sensory impulses that make my brain act like a computer interpreter. Do you know that at close range a computer with a sensory readout can’t match me? It’ll miss or misinterpret things, because a machine doesn’t understand things like I do.”

“That’s because it doesn’t have the intuitive sense for interpreting what it sees,” Crusher told him placidly. “You should be proud of that.”

“I am,” he insisted. “But I didn’t know what those forms on the bridge were any more than anybody else did, including Mr. Riker. When people look at me, they don’t see me. They just see that thing.” He cast his hand in her direction, encompassing all of her and the item she held.

“They don’t understand,” the doctor said, “and you can’t expect them to. They aren’t going to understand how much it takes out of you to make this visor work.”

“I know!” he shot back with a frustrated slap of his hand on his knee. “I know . . . but it’s hard to be reasonable sometimes, specially when everybody’s kicking off a Geordi-what-do-you-see. They don’t know what it took to learn to interpret all the information I get out of every square inch I see. I’m not a machine, doc, you know? My brain wasn’t made to do this. It’s not like I look at a thing and a dozen little labels appear to tell me what it’s made of. I had to learn what every impulse meant, every vibration, every flicker, every filter, every layer of spectral matter . . . people don’t know what it takes out of me to say,

‘I don’t know what it is.’ ”

Crusher stopped her adjusting and paused to gaze at him, suddenly moved by her ability to simply do that. Because he was blind now, without his prosthetic, he didn’t see her pause. He didn’t—couldn’t—see anything. And she was glad of it.

“It’s not easy, you know,” he went on. “It took years of retraining—painful retraining—to make my brain do this. A human brain is never meant by nature to do what mine’s doing. And every time I have to say, ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I’ve never seen anything like this before,’ it goes through me like a steel bolt. It means I’m truly blind.”

“Oh, Geordi . . . ” Crusher murmured.

“Sometimes,” he said, “I go through twenty or thirty levels of analysis and every one takes a piece out of me. When I can’t tell what it is I’m seeing, it’s not like a sighted person looking at a box and not being able to see what’s inside. It’s like holding your breath and diving deeper and deeper, no matter how much it hurts . . . and when you can’t touch bottom, you still have to plow back to the surface before your lungs explode . . . oh, I can’t explain it; I can’t make you *see.*”

He reached out in his blindness and by instinct alone he found the visor she held as she stood nearby—a blind man’s instinct that told him where her hands were—and with his artificial eyes back in his own hand he slid from the table and somehow found the door. As it opened for him he went flawlessly through it, homing in on the sound and the faint gush of air from the corridor, as though to show her he could be a whole person without the burden of his high-tech crutch.

“Geordi,” Crusher called after him, but she did so only halfheartedly, for she had no words to help him. She winced as Riker appeared out of nowhere and Geordi bumped into him. It would’ve been such a smooth exit otherwise . . .

“Lieutenant—” Riker started to greet, then simply gaped as LaForge plowed past him without even a “sorry, sir.” After Geordi rounded the arch of the corridor and disappeared, Riker crooked a thumb in that direction as he came into the sickbay. “What’s eating him?”

“You are.” Crusher folded her arms and sighed.

“*I* am? How’d I get into this?”

“Funny you should ask.” She grasped his arm and drew him into the

sickbay, then planted him in the nearest chair and assumed her lecture position—any parent knows it. Sliding her narrow thigh up onto an exam table, she broached the subject with a practiced look of sternness. “He’s a little bothered by that episode on the bridge.”

“He told you about that . . . okay, I’ll bite,” Riker said. “Why’s it bothering him?”

Beverly Crusher’s lovely art deco features were marred by the situation. “You sure you want to know?”

Frustrated, Riker held his hands out. “When did I start looking so aloof to everybody? I want to know.”

“That’s not what you came down here for.”

“No,” he admitted. “I came down because I knew LaForge was here and I wanted an analysis of physical composition of those life images. I figure he’s the best man to do it.”

“I think you’d better get Data to do it.”

“Why? All of a sudden, everybody’s functioning at half power. Isn’t Geordi LaForge the expert on spectroscopy?”

“Only by necessity,” she said, “not by choice.”

Riker looked at her; just looked at here android in him too.

He saw in Data’s eyes, in his expression, an intense need to define himself and discover his true nature. *And here I am, at the heart of his struggle. Part of that struggle may be to admit a truth that isn’t very pleasant.*

“I don’t know what you are, I admit that,” he told Data with a vocal shrug. “I’m not qualified to say. But Starfleet checked you out and you tested out alive. That’s good enough for—”

“By machines, sir,” Data reminded painfully. “Machines will report whatever they are told to report. No human looks at me and thinks I am human too. And you, more than anyone, still treat me like a machine.”

Until his chest started hurting, Riker didn’t even inhale. What had he been thinking about, admitting the truth? *What happens when it slams you across the face and insists you look?*

“Sir,” Data began, solemn again, “if I may go now . . . ”

Sadly Riker leaned on the command chair and nodded.

“Dismissed.”

From behind him—he didn’t watch—he heard the hiss of the turbolift door and the soft sucking noise behind the wall as the lift shot away through the ship. Riker found himself staring at the spot where Data’s boots had left a faint impression on the carpet. Now he breathed deeply, though it gave him no comfort, and listened to the thickness of his own voice.

“The tin man wants a heart.”

“You wanted privacy. You have it. All I ask is that you make good use of it, Counselor.”

Her delicate white hands were trembling, and nothing, nothing would make them stop. She didn’t blame herself for the lack of control—in fact she didn’t even do much to stop it. Burying what she was feeling and experiencing would only do her damage. But the captain was here and he was ready to listen to a confession, a confession that would take a single trouble and multiply it. She had thought having the answers would help her, ease her burden, but no. She knew many more things than she had an hour ago, and nothing was easier. Clarity in this case was more painful than obscurity.

Her head and neck ached as though someone had been sitting on her shoulders and twisting her skull.

“I’ve never experienced anything like this before, Captain,” she said, easing into it. “I’ve had to block thoughts before, but these simply crash through my barriers. These people are so desperate that they’re forcing their way into my mind, no matter how I try to close them off. I don’t understand the science, but there are definitely living, conscious life essences inside the phenomenon. Not memories, not residues, but the actual living essences of individuals. Somehow this thing preserves the consciousness and discards the physical body. And they do have a clear sense of self, Captain.”

“All humans?”

“I’m not sure, sir. I receive impressions of others, but it may be that

only the humans can empathize closely enough with me to communicate. But . . . I know who they are now."

Picard sat behind his glossy black desk and nodded. He tried, tried hard, not to appear impatient, and though there was no fooling her, at least she might appreciate the effort. But there was a definite "I'm waiting" in his posture. "Arkady Reykov and the members of his crew," he said, quite flatly and with a touch of anticlimax.

Troi blinked. "How did you know?"

Picard flopped his hand on the desktop and casually said, "One needn't be telepathic."

She faltered, frowning into the black shine of his desk, and said, "Yes, I suppose it is obvious. But there's more, sir. Or shall I say, there are more. Many more. Millions more, in fact. Their level of communication is much higher than anything verbal, as though they've forgotten over the years how to use simple words and pictures. We may be the first outside contact they've had—"

"Since 1995," she supplied steadily.

"Yes," she murmured. "For a while, what they wanted was very confusing. There were so many minds shouting at me, some rational, some not . . . only the strongest of those can still maintain a single self-image, but only for limited amounts of time."

"Like the appearance Riker witnessed in the corridor."

"I believe so," she told him, not ready to commit herself to that with a blind yes.

"And now it's clearer?" Picard prompted. "What they want? You have some idea?"

Troi bent her elegant head, lashes like black whisk brooms dropping to shade her eyes. Then she looked up. "Captain, I haven't told you everything."

Jean-Luc Picard leaned forward, his elbows rubbing across the desk's smooth surface and reflected that she of all people was not one whom he counted on for courteous lies. Courteous silence, perhaps. But deception, no. The first reaction was anger, but that flared and died more quickly than a match in wind. Yet such confessions on a starship could cost lives, and always provoked him.

But something had driven her to this, and Picard's curiosity was plenty bigger than his ego at this point.

"Then tell me everything now," he said.

Troi raised her chin as though to walk into the word. "About the confusion. It's true that there are millions of minds pressing upon me, but there is . . . an absolute unanimity in what they want—"

The door buzzed.

"Yes, who is it?" Picard barked impatiently.

"Riker reporting, Captain."

Picard started to admit him, but Troi grasped the rim of his desk and pulled forward in her chair. "No, sir, please don't. Don't let him in."

The curiosity burned. "Not even Riker?" Picard said.

"Please, sir . . . "

He gazed at her for a moment, then spoke aloud to the intercom. "Just a few more minutes, Mr. Riker."

There was a thunderous pause. Picard could imagine the glances running the main bridge.

"Yes, sir . . . I'll be out here."

Picard indulged in a little grunt and muttered, "Sounds a bit wounded, doesn't he? Now, what's this all about, Counselor? These people want us to do something for them?"

"You have a decision to make that no single person should have to make. I thought you shouldn't also have to live with the opinions of the entire crew. That's why I'm speaking to you privately."

"I appreciate that, but please—"

"Most religions describe a kind of hell, Captain," she said carefully. Her shoulders shuddered with the effort. "Now . . . I know what that is."

"No doubt, but what's that got to do with these beings?"

Troi's lovely eyes took on a bitter anger. "I can't make it clear enough,

sir, that these people are still alive. They're not supernatural. They're living creatures, many of whom are—or were—human as much as you are human. They have truly achieved immortality. They are still conscious and self-aware."

"All right," Picard told her, "I understand that. What do they want?"

She clamped her hands into two tight balls, the skin thinning over her knuckles and turning icy white. "They want you to help them die."

* * *

"Quit saying that. You're not a machine. I can tell that by just looking at you."

Geordi LaForge gave Data a playful push as they entered the dark corridor that led to the warp reserve. It took clearance through three doors, each marked AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY before they were admitted to the especially heavy door marked

RESTRICTED AREA

ANTIMATTER RESERVE CONTAINMENT CENTER

NO ENTRY WITHOUT LEVEL 5 CLEARANCE

The room was very dark, lit only by two tiny pink utility lights on either side. Data's flashlight cut a clean white path before them. Though the darkness still pressed around them, Geordi could see quite well by that small brightness, and he led the way through stacked storage crates and high-clearance mechanical and computer panels.

"I expected a lot of problems to come my way on space duty," Geordi said, "but I didn't expect one of them to be trying to find a definition for life itself."

"That is indeed the captain's dilemma now," Data said, "because of me."

“It’s not because of you. Cut it out. Boy, after all this trying to act human, you sure found an annoying way to actually do it.”

Data looked up into the darkness, quickly, hopefully. “What am I doing?”

“Pitying yourself, that’s what. Knock it off.”

Since he hadn’t been aware of doing it, Data wasn’t quite sure what to knock off. By the time he found *knock it off* in his memory banks, the subject had passed and Geordi was leading the way into an anteroom that held most of the computer monitors for the actual antimatter containment. On the dim panels, a few lights and patterns were flicking and flashing away happily in their mechanical ignorance, as if trying to say that all was well, all was as it should be.

“It’s got to be here somewhere,” Geordi muttered. “You try the antimatter injector and I’ll—”

As the doors came together behind them, there was a corresponding clatter on the starboard side of the room that made them both look, just in time to see a dark form duck behind a panel.

“Who’s there?” Geordi demanded.

Data stepped in front of him and sharply ordered, “This is Commander Data. You are in a restricted area. Identify yourself.”

An innocent face peeked up in the corner, suddenly looking very guilty.

“Wesley!” Geordi exclaimed. “What are you doing in here? Come out of there.”

Wesley’s lanky form, still trying to grow into its own long bones, slowly sprouted from behind the panel. His hands gripped the hem of his sweater, a dark and thickly knit sweater that under these circumstances looked like reconnaissance gear. He’d known he was going to be in a cool area of the ship, evidently. “What’re you two doing here?” he echoed. “I mean, it’s sort of the middle of a crisis, isn’t it?”

“Right in the middle,” Geordi said. “The captain’s ordered an energy blackout—”

“I know.”

“And we picked up a power drain in the reserve tank. We’ve got to find it before the creature picks it up.” Through his visor Geordi saw Wesley’s face suddenly erupt with infrared.

“It can’t be much of a drain, can it?” the boy asked. “If you haven’t picked it up before . . . right?”

“That’s right, but it doesn’t make a bit—Wesley, what do you know about this?”

Data approached them and said, “Wesley, if you know about the power drain, you had better tell us. The antimatter from the tank has been emergency-dumped, and we cannot restock from the reserves until we discover the nature of the leak and lock it down.”

Wesley’s young eyes flashed in the dimness. “Well . . . I only . . . I was . . . ”

Geordi fanned his flashlight’s beam angrily. “This area’s off limits, for Christ’s sake, Wes!”

“I know, but that’s just a technicality and it would’ve taken weeks, maybe months, to get the power authorization if I’d gone through channels—”

“Channels exist for a reason. So do rules like off limits. You know what off limits means? What’re you up to?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Report, Ensign,” Data said, cutting through the familiarity and putting juniors where juniors belong.

“It’s really nothing. Someday it might be, though,” Wesley said, intimidation forgotten in enthusiasm. “Just wait. I’m doing an experiment on an idea I had to increase phaser power without pulling any more energy. I’ve got a little mock-up over here—”

He led them to a table that held a shapeless contraption. It looked like so much scrap, except that a light beam was glowing straight through the middle of it.

“What the hell—” Geordi stepped up to the model and pointed at it. “What’s this hooked up to?”

Wesley’s sheepishness returned. “I was . . . tapping the antimatter

reserve."

"Goddamn, Wes! You have an acting rank. Don't you know that means you could be court-martialed?"

"But it's never used! They don't use it once in twenty years! How was I supposed to know they'd need it?"

"You do know this area's off limits to anyone but authorized personnel," Data said.

Geordi barely let him finish the sentence. "You start screwing around with the antimatter reserve and get a short or something, and suddenly there's another sun around! It's dangerous to tap the reserve directly. Don't you know that?"

"Oh, come on, Geordi, it's not that bad," Wesley complained. "Under normal operation, nobody'd notice. It'd be like plugging in one extra lamp in a hotel. But with all the power shut down—"

"You know better than this." Geordi shook his head, then said, "Then again, maybe you don't. How long have you had this thing hooked up to the AR?"

"Well, only about four . . . or five . . . "

"Days?"

"Weeks."

"Oh, my God. You gotta be kidding me. What were you trying to do?"

"I didn't mean any trouble."

"Well, you've got trouble, mister."

Wesley pulled out a professional whipped-puppy look. "You'd turn me in?"

Geordi looked at the little contraption again and scanned it for invisible leakage. "This is a starship, not a playground, Wes." The device was working, somehow, doing something, though Geordi couldn't tell what.

Now what? Report the boy? Wesley was genius material, sure, but not experienced. Had he not been living on a major starship, with all its labs and state-of-the-art technology, where experts in actual applied

science, applied engineering, applied mechanics were readily available, some even teaching classes to the kids, he'd be just another smart sixteen-year-old. Living on Earth or such, he'd be bright and showered with opportunities, but not like this. Not to the point of getting his hands on a starship any old day. Geordi knew Wes Crusher had a natural ability to conceptualize the way the universe works, but the only way he could learn to apply it was through all the redundant practice a sixteen-year-old hated even to think about. On the bridge a week ago, Geordi had let Wesley try the helm controls because the boy had so quickly picked up the theories and principles of navigation, only to find that he had plenty of difficulty actually working the controls. Only time, only experience could teach that.

But this—this kind of game-playing was dangerous, and Wesley couldn't see the danger. Hadn't had his hands burned yet.

"Shut it down," Geordi ordered.

"Okay," Wes mumbled. "That's what I was doing anyway."

"Ah—so you knew we'd pick it up. This is wrong and you knew it. What's the matter?"

"Well . . . " Wesley hesitated, then said, "I'm not sure how to break the flow without rupturing the magnatomics. Besides, this could never pull enough power to cause a problem. That's why I went ahead and did it."

"Wes, even senior engineers don't tamper with antimatter. Data, look this over. We've got to disconnect it."

The android moved in, and Wesley stepped aside. "What is the principle behind this device?"

Using his hands to illustrate every little twist and turn of his idea, Wesley explained. "Basically, it breaks